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## HOMESPUN AND GOLD



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# HOMESPUN AND GOLD

BY

ALICE BROWN

Author of "The Prisoner," "The Black Drop," etc.

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THE MACMILLAN COMPANY

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# HOMESPUN AND GOLD

## THE WEDDING RING

“WELL, now,” said Aunt Nabby Strong, “to think you should ha’ remembered that!”

She stood in the kitchen, in sunshine the brighter from the facets of the snow, and turned on her thin gnarled finger a wedding ring. She was a sweet old lady, straight and tall, a complexity of kindliness and the sobriety of long experience in her withered face. Her daughter, Nancy Hart, the moral of her, so far as youth can echo age, stood by, with keen delight upon her face. Nancy still had on her outdoor things, but she had not been able to wait for more than a second after crossing the sill before she gave her mother the present she had brought.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Strong, “I know exactly what I said, an’ you took it up an’ remembered it, an’ now you’ve spent your money so’s’t I should have a ring. If you ain’t the beater! Well, you always was, Nancy. Anybody never had to say what they wanted twice over but there ’twas.”

Nancy was throwing off her enveloping shawl and the jacket underneath.

“I dunno but I ought to told Sarah,” she said, “and let her come in on it. But I was so mean and selfish, I just wouldn’t, that’s all.”

Mrs. Strong still stood turning the ring round and round upon her finger. A little shadow lay for a moment on her face.

"No," she said. "I guess Sarah wouldn't ha' took any great int'rest. An' I'd ruther have it from you anyways."

This last was the kind of speech Mrs. Strong never really permitted herself; but she had had rather a trying hour with Sarah that morning, and the memory of it still abode with her. "Come. You se' down an' get het through," said she, with the intent of dismissing Sarah from their minds.

They drew up to the stove and turned their dress skirts back from the too impetuous heat, and Nancy spoke.

"Well, mother, that ring does look kinder nice. What you s'pose Sarah'll say?"

"I dunno," owned Mrs. Strong, on her guard now against any implication of Sarah. "She was here anyways when I said what I did that led to 't. Lemme see. I says, 'Just to think you girls both got weddin' rings, an' my finger's bare as a bone.'"

"Well, it's queer," said Nancy, "but I never thought of it till that minute. 'Why,' says I to myself, 'that's so. Mother never's wore a weddin' ring.'"

"Your father never thought of it, I guess," said Mrs. Strong defensively. "I vow I never did. You see we lived 'way off next door to nowhere, an' then we went out west, an' we worked so hard I guess we shouldn't ha' had time to concern ourselves with weddin' rings. My hands were in the dough or in the suds most o' them years, an' I guess nobody'd seen whether I had a weddin'



ring or not. I guess your father'd laugh if he could know my darter had to up an' buy me one."

They laughed together tenderly, and then Nancy turned to what had been worrying her all that morning.

"You thought best to have Sarah go to the depot after Lyddy?" she asked.

Cousin Lydia was coming that day. The visit was of more or less importance for Lydia was going out west to work, and Aunt Nabby thought she'd better look over the two chests of her mother's things and see what she wanted to take with her, since she might not come back again.

Mrs. Strong's brow was wrinkled now with a returned anxiety.

"Well, no," she said, "I didn't think 'twas best. I wanted to send Hermie Yorke, but Sarah seemed possessed to go an' she got the better o' me. She 'peared here with the colt, an hour or more 'fore train time, an' nothin' for it but she must go herself."

"You s'pose she'll say anything to Lyddy?" Nancy asked.

The fine lines in her mother's forehead seemed to spring out by exact duplication in her own.

"I dunno," said Mrs. Strong. "I talked it over with her 'fore she went. I said, 'Now you might as well look it in the face. Lyddy's had a baby, an' the baby's died. An' Lyddy wa'n't married, an' the reason she wa'n't was because John Wilde was kinder crazed with all the queer meetin's he'd been to an' the books he'd read, an' he thought marryin' was beneath him.'"

"I s'pose Lyddy thought so, too," said Nancy wonderingly.

"Course she did. Course Lyddy thought so. The sun rose an' set in John Wilde, an' she believed every individual thing he told her to. 'Well,' says I to Sarah, 'John's dead, an' the baby's dead, an' Lyddy's heart's broke. That's all there is to it. If John was alive, mebbe we could pry his eyes open some way or another, an' make him see what 'tis to be a God-fearin' man that wants to live as other men do. But he's dead,' I says, 'an' we can't go to takin' it out o' Lyddy.'"

This was a long speech for Aunt Nabby Strong, and she ended breathlessly and with appealing eyes bent on her daughter. They asked for confirmation.

"Well," said Nancy, "seems if you put it pretty plain. But Sarah's so high-spirited."

"High-sperited! I guess she is," said her mother, as if there would be a general illumination if she told all she knew. "Sarah acts as if she was the judge of all the earth. Well, there, I didn't mean to go so fur as that, but Sarah's no compassion. She never did have, an' she's no better on 't now."

"She ain't much like you and father," hesitated Nancy.

She was not very happy about Sarah. She was always trying to remember they were own sisters and to accept her without question on that account; but there was an unknown something in Sarah that forbade.

"Don't I hear bells?" said Mrs. Strong. "It's early for 'em, but that colt clips it right along."

She dropped her dress skirt and went to the window, while the bells jingled nearer.

"Well, we needn't ha' worried," said she. Her voice

bespoke the keenest disappointment. "Lyddy ain't come, after all."

Nancy, too, was on her feet.

"S'pose I'd better go out and help unharness?" she questioned.

"No, she's brought Hermie Yorke along. She's comin' right in."

In a moment Sarah was stamping off the snow in the shed, and she entered with a breeze: a tall, robust woman of a bright complexion and black eyes under heavy brows. She gave a little nod to Nancy, but there were evidently things on her mind to crowd out common greetings. She threw off her well-fitting coat, and Nancy and her mother, suddenly grown smaller by the nearness of her abundance, stood doubtfully waiting for her to speak.

"Well," said Mrs. Strong, at length, when Sarah emerged in all her matronly strength and fullness, and rubbed her hands slightly as if she scorned the enervating warmth of stoves, "so Lyddy didn't come."

"Oh, yes," said Sarah, in her full voice charged with a metallic quality, sometimes scornful, sometimes only forceful in an unclassified way. "Lyddy's come."

"Why, where is she?" said Mrs. Strong.

"She got out at the cross-road. Said she's goin' to walk the rest o' the way."

In spite of themselves, Nancy and her mother exchanged a quick look of understanding.

"Well," Mrs. Strong temporized, "seems if that was kind of a foolish thing to do when she might ha' rid to the door."

"Oh, no," said Sarah. She had seated herself at the

table and began opening a neat roll of work. "I had these shirts all ready to cut out, and so I thought I'd bring 'em along. Oh, no, she give the reason. 'Twas just such a reason as you'd expect Lyddy to give, considerin' everything that's come and gone. She said 't was walkin' through the cross-road just such a day as this when she fust see John Wilde, and she wanted to go through it again."

"Well," said Mrs. Strong inaptly, "I should think she would, poor child!"

Sarah had a long pair of scissors in her hand. She was just rising to snip the unbleached cloth before her.

"You should think she would?" she repeated. "And you're a respectable married woman, Mother Strong."

"Well, I guess I be," put in Mrs. Strong. Fire was in her eye; her soft cheek flushed. "Nancy an' I are both of us respectable, an' so be you."

"And Lyddy's done what she has, and you can say 'poor child'?"

Aunt Nabby had got a grip on herself now, the grip invented for Sarah only.

"Sarah," said she, "sometimes it seems as if you hadn't got no more compassion than if you was born yesterday."

But Sarah did not hear. She was bending over the table, cutting the long perfectly accurate slashes that led to shirts.

"I talked to Lyddy," said she. "I done that before we got to the cross-road."

A look of whimsical shrewdness ran over Aunt Nabby's face.

“Why, dear heart,” said she, “that’s why Lyddy got out. I can see it all as plain as day. Lyddy’d bore all she could, an’ the only thing she could do was to jump out an’ walk along that road an’ call up the imagine of somebody ’twas kind to her.”

“And when she comes here, I want you should talk to her,” said Sarah. “She says she sha’n’t deny anything about what’s happened. She says it might ha’ been mistaken, but ’t wa’n’t wicked, and as for John Wilde, he’s one o’ the saints o’ the earth. Mebbe she’ll hear to you, but she won’t to me. I’ve said my say.”

“That’s right, Sarah,” said Aunt Nabby quietly. “Don’t you say no more.”

And then the door opened, and Lyddy came in. Lyddy was young and fresh and gentle, but the red of the cold was in her cheeks, and a spark of brave rebellion in her eyes. At sight of her with that surface brilliancy overspread upon her face, Aunt Nabby was vaguely startled and drew near her in a mute questioning. Not this was the Lyddy she had known, in the wistful gentlehood of her youth; and the Lyddy she had imagined, in the shadow of the tree of grief, had been a bowed and sunken creature. This girl held her head high and looked at even Aunt Nabby with a defiant questioning. “How are you going to receive me?” said the look. “Then I will tell you how I shall behave in return.”

But when Aunt Nabby had kissed her, and ventured something about the cold, and Nancy had taken her coat and hat away from her and brought a chair to the fire with more murmurous sympathy, the ice that seemed to have formed over her look and manner melted, and

they saw Lyddy as she used to be. But her reddened hands were scarcely warm before she asked abruptly:

"Where's mother's things?"

There were two hair trunks by the dresser. Aunt Nabby indicated them with a nod.

"I had 'em brought down here," she said. "I didn't want you to go up in that cold chamber such a day as this."

Lyddy seemed to have fallen into a musing,— this at the mention of her mother's name.

"I don't know's I can take many of the things with me," she said. "You see I don't know yet whether I shall suit."

"Why, you leave 'em long as ever you like," said Aunt Nabby. "Only I thought you'd mebbe want to go over 'em an' see if there wa'n't suthin' 'twould be a comfort to you."

Sarah was still making her long relentless slashes where every one told. Now she sat down and, gathering the cloth toward her, began to baste.

"You'll have to be pretty careful, Lyddy," she said, "goin' off on such a jaunt, to fall in with the right kind o' folks."

Lyddy turned upon her the hostile gaze Sarah was always awakening in her kind.

"I'm goin' with Miss Peterson," she said. There was a cold animosity in her tone, and Aunt Nabby glanced at her out of a sorrowful surprise. Again she did not seem the same Lyddy at all. But suddenly Aunt Nabby smiled a little. This was Sarah's Lyddy, she remembered. Their own Lyddy wouldn't have a chance to show herself while Sarah was within hail.

"I guess folks that are good enough for Miss Peterson to know are good enough for me."

"Now jest what be you goin' to do out there?" asked Aunt Nabby comfortably. "Nancy understood from your letter 'twas a kind of a housekeeper's place."

"Miss Peterson's sister's got a sanitarium where folks go when they're gettin' well," said Lyddy. There was an eagerness of interest in her air. She seemed to have forgotten Sarah. "I'm goin' to fill in chinks and do anything I'm told, and if they think it's worth while, I'm goin' to take a course and be a nurse."

This she said with pride.

"You never'd get your diploma," said Sarah. "You might as well face that at the start 'fore you set your heart on it."

"I don't know why I couldn't be a nurse," said Lyddy. She seemed unable now to summon up the defiance that was Sarah's due. "I'm young and I'm strong, and mother used to say I took the best care of her of anybody, 'cept Aunt Nabby, maybe."

"I wasn't referrin' to that," said Sarah. "If you force me to say it, I can't do no less than tell you nurses have to be of good character. They look 'em up."

"Sarah! Sarah!" said Aunt Nabby. Her cheeks were pink, but she spoke with a careful calm. "You don't want to say nothin' you'll be sorry for."

"I am of good character," said Lyddy. She held her head up and looked at Sarah with anger in her glance and beating through her voice. "There can't nobody make me feel I ain't. I s'pose if anybody could, you could, Sarah Bell, because you'd rake and

scrape till you found somethin' against me, if there was anything. But I'm as good a woman as you are, and I'm as good as Nancy. I ain't so good as Aunt Nabby is, because there never's anybody as good as she is, 'cept mother. She was."

Sarah pressed her lips together until they made a line of white.

"Who is Miss Peterson?" she said, "when it comes to that?"

"Miss Peterson is the lady that come into the hospital after the baby was born," said Lyddy passionately. "And the baby died, and John was dead, and they made her tell me. And she did. And I guess if anybody else had told me I'd died, too. But she just made me live."

"That's right," said Aunt Nabby. She put up a thin forefinger and poked a tear away from under each glass of her spectacles. What her gentle approval was meant to touch, whether it was right that Miss Peterson should tell Lyddy or right that Lyddy should not die, no one could say. Nor could Aunt Nabby have said. She was only conscious of a heart-ache over the woe of her world.

Sarah, needle poised in air, was looking at her.

"There, mother," said she, "what'd I tell you? That's exactly it. Lyddy'd just as soon speak of that man as eat, and it's a shame and disgrace."

Lyddy was sobbing now and talking wildly in between.

"I don't know why I can't speak of John Wilde right here 'mongst my own folks," she said. "He was a good man, Sarah Bell. He was as good as your own husband, and better, because he spent his life tryin' to



make things right for the down-trodden and poor. And he'd have been alive this day if he hadn't been tryin' to save a strike-breaker and got the brick himself."

Sarah was quivering now to the tips of her capable fingers.

"That's what you believe in, is it?" she inquired. "You believe in a man that goes round ruinin' young girls and breakin' up the home."

Lyddy started to her feet.

"Don't you say such a thing as that, Sarah Bell!" she cried, with passion. "He stood by what he believed, and I stood by it with him, and Miss Peterson says 'twas wrong, and maybe I shall come to think so, and maybe John would if he'd lived; but he didn't live, and now I've got nothin' but his darlin' memory, and you let it be, Sarah Bell, you let it be."

She was sobbing bitterly, her poor face quite blurred with tears. Aunt Nabby came and laid a hand on her shoulder.

"There, dear heart," she said. "There! there! We're goin' to have Indian puddin' for dinner, everything you like."

Lyddy wiped her face off recklessly with a sweep of the hand.

"I don't want any dinner, Aunt Nabby," said she. "I ain't goin' to stay."

"You ain't goin' to stay?"

All three women exclaimed it in different keys.

"No," said Lyddy. "That's what I got out and went through the cross-road for, to tell the Peltons I wanted they should carry me back to the twelve o'clock

train. I did want to walk over the ground John and I used to walk over together; but that wa'n't all. When I found Sarah was here, and when I see she was goin' to take it out of me every word she spoke, I says to myself, "I'll get away quick as I can."

"Sarah ain't goin' to take it out of you," said Aunt Nabby. She had steadied her voice and her glance to the subduing of them both, as if it were a childish quarrel and demanded the reserves of motherly sagacity. "Sarah's goin' to be a good girl and so be you, too. Mother's ashamed o' you, Sarah. I never knew you to act quite so bad as you've acted this day."

Sarah had flushed a deep sullen red. She was rolling up her work.

"I guess," said she, "if I've made so much trouble, I might as well go home and let you all eat your Indian puddin' in peace."

"O Sarah!" said Nancy.

"You needn't trouble yourself," said Lyddy, wiping her blurred face again. "In an hour and a half I shall be gone. I guess 't won't hurt anybody to live in the same house with me till then."

"Sarah!" said Aunt Nabby. She spoke with a dignity none of her children had ever been able to withstand. "I want you should run over to Mis' Lamson's an' see if you can borrrer me a cup o' cream. I ain't got hardly enough for dinner. You put my plaid shawl over your head an' clip it right along. You take this cup."

Sarah hesitated for a moment. Then, without a word, she put the shawl over her shoulders, and took the cup and went out of the kitchen door and down the

path. Sarah needed intervals for thinking things over. Aunt Nabby had been used to giving them to her ever since she was a little girl and had had tantrums.

“Now,” said Aunt Nabby, “le’s pull out the chists an’ git at ’em. Nancy, you take hold.”

Nancy and Lyddy pulled out the two hair trunks, and Lyddy knelt before the first and opened it. She had done crying now, but her face was deeply sad in a way that touched Nancy to the soul. Nancy was very fond of Lyddy. It had meant enduring grief to her to see her little playmate, whose visits were unbroken pleasure, turn into a sad woman, a victim of disgrace. Lyddy was lifting the garments before her with a sorrowful tenderness and then, in an indeterminate way, laying them down again. At last she leaned back and looked at Aunt Nabby, pottering about the kitchen under a pretense of work, to leave her free for the sadness of her task.

“Aunt Nabby,” said she, “I couldn’t any more tell what to do with mother’s clo’es — I just can’t do it. You couldn’t make ’em over for you and Nancy, could you?”

“Mebbe I could,” said Aunt Nabby encouragingly. She knew everything was too short and too small, but that was neither here nor there when Lyddy’s feelings were concerned. “You could let me go over ’em when you’re gone, if you felt to, an’ I’d do what I thought was best.”

Lyddy shut the chest.

“That’s it,” said she. “You see to it. You’re always secin’ to things, Aunt Nabby, when our courage gives out. I guess we just lay down on you.”

Then she opened the other chest. Here were a few pictures and the precious among the books. The rest had gone to Uncle Dill, who was a minister.

"It's no use for me to pretend I can pick over mother's things and say which shall be used and which be thrown away," said Lyddy. "I've got as much courage as most folks, but when it comes to that — why, it seems if I was throwin' away mother when I spec'late over her things."

Nancy looked at her a moment where she sat, slight and pale in her black dress, taking up the books with fumbling hands. Nancy, as she told Aunt Nabby afterward, could have cried, and out of a quick impulse to seem to help, she dropped on the floor at Lyddy's side, and began to open books.

"O Aunt Nabby, weren't you cunnin' to save these?" Lyddy said. "Here's my reader, and here's my spellin' book. Can't I just see myself standin' up there in the middle o' the class with my plaid dress on and spellin' 'separate'? Well, I guess I can."

"I kinder thought you'd like your school-books," said Aunt Nabby primly. She was beginning to be happy. From time to time, in the midst of her tasks, she made an errand to the window and stood there for a moment turning about the shining ring. "I didn't s'pose you'd want to take the school-books with ye, but I thought mebbe you'd kind o' like to look 'em over."

"No," said Lyddy, "I couldn't take 'em with me, but I'm glad I know where they be. You'll keep 'em, won't you? even if I didn't ever have a roof to cover me, so't I could take 'em away."

"Law, yes," said Aunt Nabby. "I'll shove 'em

right in under the eaves an' they can stay as long as I do, an' long's Nancy does, I guess. The old Bible's in there som'er's."

Lyddy had her hand on it. She was dragging it out from underneath.

"If I wa'n't a happy girl when I could sit down Sunday afternoon and turn over the pictures," said she, "then I guess there never was one."

She had it in her lap now, and Nancy's head was close to hers. First there was the Madonna of the Chair.

"I always thought that baby was the cunnin'est," said Lyddy.

Two tears ran down her cheeks and splashed the page. She looked up quickly, not minding the tears. They were always coming now.

"Aunt Nabby," said she, "there's somethin' I'd like to do. Now I've thought of it I want to do it so't seems if I couldn't wait a minute."

"Well," said Aunt Nabby, "if it's anything 't 'll give you pleasure, you do it. You ain't had none too much pleasure in this world, so fur."

Lyddy was drawing uneven breath, and now she put her hand to her lips, as if for a moment she must keep in the daring words.

"But I wouldn't do it unless you owned 'twas right," she said then, with unconscious passion in her voice. "Only, now I've thought of it, seems if I'd got to do it."

Aunt Nabby's hand, the wedding ring on it, was on Lyddy's shoulder. Aunt Nabby, as she spoke, could not help looking at the ring. It made her feel so soft and young and pitiful toward everything; and yet

Aunt Nabby had not needed reminders to be pitiful.

"You tell what 'tis, dear," said she. "If I can get it for ye, I will. Or so'd Nancy, far as that goes. You tell."

"It's this," said Lyddy. She moistened her dry lips. "Aunt Nabby, we're all down here in the Bible, when we're born and — marriages, and deaths."

"Yes," said Aunt Nabby, "I s'pose so. I've kep' our records pretty careful an' I s'pose your mother did. I don't know's ever I looked over hers."

"Oh, they're all there," said Lyddy, "mother's marriage, and my birth, and your marriage — oh, yes, they're all there. I can see just how they look on the page. Mother was so afraid she wouldn't write 'em nice she used to rule the lines with a pin. Aunt Nabby, my baby" — She stopped and her hot eyes were on Aunt Nabby's face.

"Yes, dear heart," said Aunt Nabby, as if she were putting a child to sleep. "There! there!"

"My baby ain't got any place in this world. And you'll say he's dead and so he don't need any."

"No, no," said Aunt Nabby hotly. "I guess I shouldn't say such a thing as that."

"Well, some would. But I named him. I named him John Wilde. And, Aunt Nabby, this is what I want. I want to put his name down here in the Bible with all the rest."

Her voice had sunk, and even although it was only Aunt Nabby, she looked at her in terror. But Aunt Nabby stayed not an instant.

"Set right still," said she. "I'll bring the pen an' ink an' put 'em on a chair."

Lyddy gave a little cry of happiness. She turned the leaves to the middle of the book, and Nancy's head was close to hers.

"Here 'tis," said she. "Here's mother. Here's Charlie that died. Here's me. Here's you, Nancy. Why, mercy sakes, what's this?"

"I can't hardly read it," said Nancy. "Seems if your mother must have wrote it after she had her shock."

"What is 't?" said Aunt Nabby.

She was waiting with the pen and ink.

"Why," said Lyddy, in a low tone of wonderment. "'Sarah adopted, 1870.' Aunt Nabby, what's that mean?"

Aunt Nabby carried the pen and ink to the window-sill and put them down with care. Then she seated herself by the table and began softly drumming on it, and mechanically she watched the shining of her ring.

"Aunt Nabby," said Lyddy, again, "what'd mother mean by writin' such a thing as that? What'd she mean?"

Nancy came to her feet and went over to stand by Aunt Nabby's chair. She saw how pale her mother was, and it troubled her.

"Perhaps she didn't mean anything," said Nancy. "You know your mother wa'n't quite herself them last days."

"No," said Aunt Nabby, in a tired voice. "Your mother wa'n't herself. That's why she passed over what we vowed we never'd speak about. I guess her mind kinder went back into the past, an' dwelt on it. An' she never felt very nigh to Sarah."

"But that was the year she was out west with you," said Lyddy. "Why, 'twas before I was born."

"Yes," said Aunt Nabby, in a dull way, "'twas the year before you're born."

"And 'twas the year I was born, mother," said Nancy, joining the train of reason. "What'd she mean by it, mother, writin' down a thing like that?"

"I guess you better not try to spec'late on't," said Aunt Nabby. "Makes me kinder faint."

"Why," said Nancy suddenly, in a loud voice, "Sarah ain't my sister. You adopted her."

"Why, no," said Lyddy, in a tone of certainty, "of course Sarah ain't your sister. Anybody'd know that, anybody that knew Aunt Nabby. Why, Aunt Nabby, course she ain't your daughter."

Aunt Nabby gave a sigh.

"Oh, my!" said she. "Poor Sarah!"

Lyddy had an answer for that. She tore out the leaf with a quick passion and rent it in four pieces.

"Here, Nancy," said she, "you do the rest."

Nancy took the pieces and thrust them into the kitchen stove and set the cover noisily.

"There, mother," said she, "Sarah's just as well off as she was before. Do you s'pose we'd tell? Why, I wouldn't even tell Edward, not if I was to be skinned for it."

Aunt Nabby still sat there regarding her wedding ring.

"Aunt Ellen knew it," she said to Nancy. "She an' your father. They're the only ones."

"Who was she, mother?" Nancy asked. It was in a low tone as if, after all, she were a little frightened.



"Why," said Aunt Nabby, "she was a poor little waif an' stray. Her mother was a kind of a gay Biddy amongst the miners, an' she left the little creatur' round on doorsteps. An' when she come to me, I took her in."

"'Course you did," said Nancy. "My! I guess if Sarah knew that she'd lay right down and die."

"Well, she never'll know it from us," said Lyddy.

She shut the book and put it soberly back among the rest.

"Here," said Aunt Nabby, "you forgot to write your line. Here's the ink."

But Lyddy was closing down the lid.

"I guess I won't do it," she said.

"Won't do it?" said Nancy. "Why won't you?"

"I don't know," said Lyddy. "I don't seem to want to. Nothin' seems so big as it did, and nothin' seems so little, come to that."

Sarah was opening the kitchen door. The plaid shawl hung from her shoulders, for she was never really cold, and in her hand was the cup of cream.

"Well, Lyddy," said she, "I've been over to Pelton's and told 'em you wouldn't go till the three. I can harness up myself, and I'll be off, if you're goin' to get rid o' me."

Lyddy laughed a little, as if she did it to show how kind she felt.

"I'll stay and be glad to," she said, "if you'll stay, too. I guess three womenfolks don't need to wrangle and fall out."

"You set the table, Sarah," said Aunt Nabby. "Lyddy, why don't you an' Nancy go out an' give

the colt a pail o' water an' then a mou'ful o' hay. You used to admire to play together in the barn."

After they had gone, arms about each other's waists like children, Aunt Nabby asked Sarah whether she'd like sugar barberry or the other, and gradually she drew her into talk about domestic things. Sarah went soberly about, working with her swift precision. She looked a shade paler and her voice was low. Aunt Nabby knew this mood in her. After Sarah had had a tantrum she usually went away and had a crying fit, and for a week after she spoke in a softer key.

Then Nancy and Lyddy came back from the barn, and the three talked together about the happenings of the house and farm, and Sarah was the gentlest of them all.

When young Pelton came for Lyddy to take her to the three o'clock, Aunt Nabby's heart swelled within her, and overflowed, Lyddy looked to her so unfriended and so small. Lyddy had reached up to kiss Sarah good-by and she had put her arms about Nancy and laid her head for a minute on Aunt Nabby's shoulder. Then she was in the sleigh, white, Aunt Nabby said afterward, as the drifted snow. Young Pelton had gone to the horse's head to unfasten the check for Foot-loose Hill, and then Aunt Nabby said something to Nancy, and Nancy said, "yes," as well as she could for tears.

"Truly?" said Aunt Nabby, and Nancy told her "yes" again, and Aunt Nabby ran out again to the sleigh.

"Here, Lyddy," said she, "you take your glove off. No, not that hand. T'other. You put this on your

finger an' you wear it, an' it'll make you think o' your mother an' Nancy an' me — an' Sarah — yes, you think o' Sarah, too. An' the baby," she whispered, for young Pelton had the check looped up, "an' them that's dead an' loved ye."

Lyddy, at the touch on her finger, gave a little crying breath, but there was light in her eyes, and color in her cheeks.

"O Aunt Nabby," said she, "did you get this for me?"

But young Pelton had stepped in and the horse threw up his head and started bravely. Aunt Nabby looked down at her bare finger a little ruefully and then at Nancy, and through their tears they laughed.

"Anyhow, I've had all day to wear it in," said Aunt Nabby. "It seems wonderful — a weddin' ring."

## MARY FELICIA

WHEN Larry Gordon came back to East Windsor to look at his grandfather's place, just inherited, and make up his mind about selling it, he found the little neighborhood in an uproar. Mary Felicia Blake had left her uncle's house, where she was the adopted daughter and "kindly treated," and walked fifteen miles on the road to running away. Larry himself had run away years before because he wanted to be an artist, and he had ended in turning out a very creditable architect. Therefore there was understanding in his tone when he asked his aunt, Mrs. Littleton: "What did she run away for?"

Mrs. Littleton was sitting by the window they always called the grape window, it was so embowered, hulling strawberries. She was a blond, redundant lady with a fine pink complexion and a tremulous double chin. Larry, himself blond and abounding in the brightness of youth, thought what a dear she was, and how the high light of her gold-rimmed glasses became her face. Only that morning he had been watching the light on Uncle Pike's bald head while they knelt in prayer. It fascinated him. He sometimes considered high lights the most absorbing thing in nature. Aunt Littleton tossed him over a strawberry, dark red and colossal in girth, and he caught it so lightly that not a cushiony

boss of it was scarred. She spoke in her warm, throaty contralto:

“Well, I ’most think it’s on account o’ the weddin’.”

“Whose wedding?”

“Hers. She’s goin’ to marry Aaron Randolph.”

“I didn’t know Aaron Randolph had a son.”

“Why, he ain’t. He ain’t never been married. It’s Aaron Randolph himself.”

“What! That old pill?” inquired Larry. “Why, he’s twenty years older than I am.”

“He’s a real nice man,” said Aunt Littleton, prudently, remembering he was a neighbor. “He owns ’most all the property on the Branch Road.”

“How old’s Mary Felicia?” asked Larry, in a quick perversity of argument.

“Oh, I guess she’s eighteen.”

“Poor little beggar! And they’re going to marry her to auld Robin Gray!”

“No, no,” said Aunt Littleton, who was not widely conversant with ballads. “It’s Aaron Randolph.”

Larry got up and walked to the stove where the kettle was boiling for tea. He lifted the lid of the kettle absently, burned his fingers, and dropped it with a clang.

“You might put in a dipperful o’ cold,” said Aunt Littleton comfortably. “I don’t like to have it bile all away to emptin’s.”

Larry did it deftly, but he kept muttering. Hands in pockets, he confronted his aunt.

“Did she really run away?” he inquired, as if he dared her to deny it.

“Well, if you can call it that,” said Aunt Littleton.

"Anyways, she walked fifteen miles on the Glass-works Road, an' when her uncle overtook her Herman Slate happened to be ridin' by, an' he heard her say she didn't know where she was goin'. So her Uncle Peacham he says to her: 'Then you jump in here an' I'll show you where you're goin'. You're goin' home 'long o' me.' "

"The old Mormon! "

"No, no, Larry," said Aunt Littleton. "He ain't a Mormon. He ain't had but one wife, an' he's a real kind, indulgent man."

"Then you don't think he's pushing Mary Felicia on to marry Robin Gray? "

"Aaron Randolph 'tis. Why, yes, I s'pose he is. He's forehanded himself, an' he's lookin' out for her good. He'll bring it to pass, too. They're God-fearin' folks, but if they see it's best for a thing to be done, they'll hang on till they fetch it. Look how they got the new school-house opposite to their barn when it seemed as if every single voter but Peacham wanted it on Ox Hill."

"Yes," Larry muttered. "They did want it, and they got it, and it served 'em right. They blotted out the most stunning view an obstinate old heathen ever had from his unworthy veranda."

"Well," said Aunt Littleton peaceably, "you couldn't blame 'em for wantin' to take the teacher to board. I s'pose they thought that would bring 'em in full as much as the view. Here's father. Now you come to supper, an' mebbe 'fore dark we shall hear somethin' about Mary Felicia."

Larry grunted in a manner that indicated unclassified emotions, and talked very fast and hard all through

supper, because he was clever as to the ways of folks, and he knew aunt and uncle thought it brilliant and liked it. But once he broke short off in a description of London's underground railway and asked:

"When's she going to be married?"

"Who?" Aunt Littleton asked, and uncle stared at him mildly.

"Mary Felicia."

"Oh! Wednesday, they say. That was the day 'twas set for."

"And this is Monday," said Larry. "By George!"

Then he went on talking about ventilation underground.

In about an hour from that time Mary Felicia, alone in her little back chamber, heard a knock at the front door below. She waited a full five minutes, wondering whether she ought to answer it. Aunt and uncle had gone to the street to carry the eggs, and had bidden her not to leave the house. She had given them her "solemn promise," and quite willingly, because escape looked futile now, and, after the way uncle had talked to her and aunt had cried, almost disgraceful. But the knock came again, and she smoothed her hair and went down.

There on the step, outside the screen, she saw what her surprised mind at once recognized as a beautiful young man. Larry had his hat off, and he was smiling at her. The smile was warm and sweet from his indignant sympathy, consciously sweet because he meant to make himself as charming as he could; but it flickered away from his mouth and up into his eyes when he saw how enchanting she was: a slip of a thing with pale,

tossed hair and lovely brows, and eyes all a sad dismay. Larry wished his painting hand was as expert as he had once tried to make it. She needed only a child's head against her slender shoulder to look the half-divine mother stepped in haste into summer from her dewy spring. Larry spoke softly in a most persuasive voice.

"Are you Mary Felicia?"

She nodded and smiled a little. This was only to be kind, for the sad eyes kept their distended gloom.

"I came to see you," said Larry. "I've got to see you. Could you come out and walk a step, so nobody will hear?"

Mary Felicia felt not the slightest distrust of him or of his methods. She behaved exactly like the little four-footed folk that were such friends of Larry, and he found he had known she would. She pushed open the screen door a hospitable space.

"Nobody'll hear now," she said, in her clear, girlish voice. "I'm all alone."

Larry at once stepped in, and she led him to the kitchen at the end of the hall. Just why she had not chosen the sitting-room Mary Felicia did not know. Perhaps it was because the kitchen had a light and seemed more welcoming. There she stood in the middle of the room and waited for him to speak, and the dark beams above her head made a setting for her golden beauty.

Larry drew out a chair from among its mates, arow against the wall, and placed it for her. Mary Felicia took it quietly, and the pale rose mounted to her cheeks. Perhaps no one had ever given her a chair in that



manner before. Then Larry fell upon Grandfather Peacham's old arm-chair by the fireplace and pulled it out for himself with no such impressive implication that it was important whether he sat down or not. Now he was opposite her and rather near. Mary Felicia was very straight in the high-backed chair, and Larry could not, as Aunt Littleton would have put it, "keep his eyes off her" for admiration.

"Mary Felicia," said he, "are you going to be married on Wednesday?"

It was as if his hand had struck her face and left it white and smitten. But she did not answer.

"You've got to tell me," said Larry. He was hardening his heart against that look of hers, because he knew he had got to strike her again. "Are you going to marry Aaron Randolph?"

Then she put her hands to her face and began to sob. They were dry sobs, and they seemed to rend her delicate body. Larry looked on for one second, and he found they were more than he could bear. He got on his feet and raged up and down the room. He took the tin dipper from the sink shelf and threw it against the wood-box with an angry force. Mary Felicia's hands dropped from her face, and she stared at the misused dipper lying face downward among the wood. A little smile crinkled up her eyes.

"Only see," she said, just as Aunt Littleton might have spoken, "how you've dented it."

Larry gave a shout of laughter that was half a joyous pæan. It seemed to him he had done excellently well.

"I'll straighten it up before I go," he said. He took

out his watch. "Mary Felicia, how soon will they be home?"

"Perhaps not for an hour," said Mary Felicia. She had a beautiful low voice with thrilling tones in it. Those notes seemed to prophesy the measure of what she would have to say if great emotions made their welcome call to her. Larry returned the watch to his pocket and resumed his chair.

"Now, Mary Felicia," said he, "you've got to answer and answer sharp. Do you want to marry that old mummy?"

Her face answered for her. She did not move an eyelash, but looked at him as sternly as he looked at her. The look seemed to ask him what business his intruding feet were making in her sad young life.

"Very good," said Larry, as if she had answered. "Now, when are you going to see Randolph again?"

This time she spoke.

"Wednesday." Her dumb lips seemed hardly to manage it.

"The day he expects to marry you?"

"Yes."

"And not before?"

The time had come, she saw, to speak, for the little that was left of her maiden pride demanded it.

"I told them I couldn't see him. If he came before — if I saw him once — I couldn't marry him."

"And yet you're going to marry him. Mary Felicia, you're a fool."

He thought he was lashing her into some spirit by that, but she only looked at him wistfully, and her pretty head abased itself.

"Yes," she said, "I guess I am."

Larry put out his hands toward her. She was so much a child that he had a quick impulse to beg her to come to him to be comforted. But she was a maiden grown, and he could not. He ventured the one tremendous question. It would rouse her into something.

"Do you love him?"

It did rouse her. She sprang from her chair so violently that it fell behind her.

"No," she cried, and the thrilling voice rang beautifully.

"Then," said Larry, also on his feet, "what are you marrying him for?"

"You don't understand," said Mary Felicia, in a hurry of hot words. "They took me when my mother died. They're fond of me. I'm fond of them. They've set their hearts on it."

"That's not all," said Larry. He watched her steadily. "Those are silly reasons for a brave girl like you."

"Oh," she cried, "do you know everything?"

"Pretty nearly," said Larry, keeping a grip on himself. "But you tell me, just the same, what's the real reason."

Her lips began to tremble, her hands, too. She spoke chatteringly, as one who has a chill.

"There's my brother. He lives out west. He took money. They paid it back. But he'll take more. And he said — he said —"

"Who said? Randolph?"

She nodded. She was gravely sure he had a right to know.

"He said whatever happened he'd keep an eye on him. He'd make it his responsibility."

There she stood shuddering, and Larry looked at her. His eyes were hot, and he didn't care. He wished he could have cried outright to persuade her to it also.

"Mary Felicia," said he softly, "you're an angelic little fool." He picked up the chair, and she sank upon it. "Now," said Larry, "what are you going to do?"

She looked at him as if he were a delivering angel. Larry was standing, hands in his pockets, frowning introspectively.

"In the first place," said he, "discard that argument. Shuffle again. Old Randolph thinks he'll stand by, but he won't, at least if it means money."

"Oh, yes, he will," returned Mary Felicia. "His word is as good as his bond."

This she said as if she had been rehearsed in it.

"Very well," conceded Larry, "say he will. But you don't love him, and you can't marry him. I forbid it."

Mary Felicia looked at him without surprise or questioning; only in adoration.

"I've got to give myself away," said Larry. "I came over here to-night to rescue you, but I've changed my mind." The look of panic swept into her eyes, but she did not speak. "I meant to get you out of your hole," said Larry, "and set you on the road to freedom. I'm always getting things out of traps. Always was, since I was a boy. Rather do it than eat. But now I've seen you, I find I've got to set a trap for

you myself. Mary Felicia, won't you walk into it? Do please walk into it."

He was half laughing now and very much confused, and Mary Felicia, feeling for his mysterious distress, tried smiling at him.

"The trouble is," said Larry, "I don't want you to marry Aaron. I want you to marry me." He remembered how Aunt Littleton would put it, and tried the vernacular. "Don't you think you could fetch it, Mary Felicia?"

Mary Felicia had never been so astonished in her life. She was not confused: only sobered by the wonder of it.

"Why," said she, "you don't know me."

"Well, when it comes to that," said Larry — "when it comes to that, you don't know me. Who am I?"

Mary Felicia looked at him a full minute and passed her hand across her eyes as if he were a vision.

"I don't know," said she.

Then they both laughed.

"Well," said Larry, "I'll tell you who I am — in a minute. But first I think it will be nicer to play the other way. They used to do that in old times. The prince and princess used to love each other even when they didn't know they were prince and princess. I'm in love with you, Mary Felicia. What do you think of that?"

She thought excellently well of it, he could see. A little flush ran into her cheeks. Her delicate lips were opening to quicker breath.

"I've been in love twice before," said Larry hurriedly. It seemed possible she might not take this

well. "Once because she had red hair. I used to follow her round, and when I got presented to her I found she liked bacteria through a microscope. The other one got married, and I've forgotten her name. I've been a decent fellow. I haven't done anything I can't tell you. Mary Felicia, what do you think?"

He was gazing at her with that warm, fascinating smile he sometimes used to make shy children bolder. But it was an honest smile. He really liked the children, and as for Mary Felicia, he adored her. She couldn't answer. Her wondering eyes dwelt on his face, questioning, and, he could not help seeing, amazingly gracious toward him.

"Well," said Larry. His lip trembled a little. He felt that, and held it firm. "Going to be in love with me, Mary Felicia?"

"Oh!" she breathed. It sounded as if he had invited her to come straightway into a fairy-tale. "I guess so."

Then Larry wanted to kiss her, and, thinking he ought not at such short notice, when he might really be charming her with no lasting spell save her longing to escape old Aaron, yet put out his arms to her. She was walking into them, fascinated, as he saw; but something within her must have sounded a recalling note. She stopped. Royal color swept into her face and her blue eyes darkened.

"Why," said Mary Felicia, "I can't do that. I'm engaged to him."

"So you are," said Larry, watching her and liking her better and better.

"I should be a horrid girl if I did that," said Mary Felicia, in a rage at herself.

Larry wanted to know one thing very much, and scoffed inwardly at himself for caring. Yet it was a gleeful scoffing, after all. He was glad he was not too worldly wise to care.

"Mary Felicia," said he, as shamefacedly as a boy, "has old Aaron ever kissed you?"

She looked at him hotly. He thought her as pretty a vision of virginity insulted as he had ever seen, and longed for brush and canvas, a surer eye, a defter hand.

"No," she said, "nor nobody else. And I never did myself, never in my life — and Aunt Peacham only once or twice."

"Then Aunt Peacham doesn't realize her privileges," said Larry happy-heartedly.

Mary Felicia blushed a little here. It evidently seemed to her that hypothesis had reached its reasonable limit.

"She's real nice," said she, "but she ain't the kissing kind."

"Well, you are," said Larry confidently, "and you'll kiss me."

She turned her head. She was listening, in the tense pose of maiden goddesses or nymphs midway in flight.

"Are they coming?" she faltered, to her fainting heart and not to him.

Again Larry was watching her. He had, it seemed to him, a great deal to learn about her.

"Are you afraid?" he asked her.

Mary Felicia turned to him. The color had gone out of her face. Her eyes looked sad and dull. Yet she answered steadfastly:

"No."

"Now I'll tell you who I am," said Larry, seeing the time was short. "My name is Gordon, and Mrs. John C. Littleton's my aunt."

Mary Felicia stared at him.

"Oh," said she at last, "then you can't mean any of those things."

"What things?"

"The things you said."

"Why can't I?"

"Because you're — you're 'way up in the world."

Now it was Larry who caught the sound of hoofs.

"Come," said he, "come with me this instant over to Aunt Littleton's. She'll be as good as gold to you. And there you'll stay till I can flax round and get the license."

She shook her head. Her mouth had hardened into an iron resolve. Larry's nerves came into revolt and he gave them rein. He laid his hands on Mary Felicia's shoulders and shook her briefly.

"You little minx," said he, "do you mean to say you don't love me, after all?"

"Oh, yes," said Mary Felicia, "I love you fast enough."

"Then come along."

"I sha'n't," said she.

His hands dropped and he glowered at her.

"Kiss me good night then, and I'll come in the morning."



"I sha'n't kiss you," said Mary Felicia. "I'm engaged to another man."

"You are, are you?" said Larry, possessed with angry admiration. "Then you promise me —"

"I sha'n't promise you anything," said Mary Felicia, "till I've taken back my promise to him."

There was the sound of wheels. She opened the door into the hall and signed to him to go. Larry looked at her in an agony of doubt that sickened him. But he went.

"I'll tell you one thing, Mary Felicia," he said, while she was opening the front door and the wheels rattled past into the yard, "if you are soldering on your handcuffs with some ridiculous New England notion, it won't work, that's all. And if next Wednesday you stand up to be married to Aaron Randolph, I shall walk in here and knock old Aaron down and throw you over my shoulder and make off with you. Do you hear?"

"Hurry," said Mary Felicia, in an agony. "They're talking in the shed." Then she bent forward to him through the dark. "Oh," she said, in a quick, passionate whisper that drew him back again, "can't you see? I've got to do it all myself. If you weren't so — so — what you are, maybe I'd be a coward, same's I was when I ran away. But I can't ever be a coward now. And you needn't come back. It wouldn't be right, for I don't know a thing — I've only been to district school and you're 'way up. But I shall always remember, and I won't ever do a thing you wouldn't like. No, I never will."

But just as Larry had possessed himself of her re-

sisting hands and drawn her toward him, she snatched them from him, and he stood alone on the step, the door between them.

A little later, when he walked into the fore-room where Aunt Littleton was sitting up for him, he met her look with a rather quizzical smile.

"Uncle thought he'd poke off to bed," said Aunt Littleton, rattling together the newspaper over which she could always fall asleep. "Where you been?"

"Oh," said Larry vaguely, "'round."

"Well, I guess you've been walkin' fast," said good Aunt Littleton.

Larry did smile at that, ironically.

"Yes," said he, "I've been going some."

He went to the sink to pump himself a draught, and there he laughed, half ruefully.

"What is it?" inquired Aunt Littleton, expectant whether she understood or not.

"I didn't pick up the dipper," said Larry. "The dipper never'll be the same again."

And he went off to bed.

Next morning he was down before breakfast, put off for his luxurious sake, was ready. Uncle Pike sat at the little side-table, glasses pushed up on his benevolent forehead and the Bible open before him to the chapter of the day.

"Uncle," said Larry, "who's town clerk?"

"Why," said Uncle Pike, as if he had to think it over, "Aaron Randolph's town clerk."

"The devil he is," said Larry, and Aunt Littleton let the kettle-cover clang. "Then," continued Larry, defending his too fervid ejaculation, "do you s'pose

he's made out a license for himself to marry Mary Felicia? "

"Why, I s'pose so," said Uncle Pike. "I s'pose he'd have to."

"Well, then, he's a worse old codger than I thought," said Larry.

"Why, I don't see's it's any worse to make out a license for't than 'tis to do it."

"I don't, either," said Larry.

Then they had breakfast and Uncle Pike went out to work. But Larry, while Aunt Littleton began her dishes, fidgeted about the kitchen until he made her, so she told him, as nervous as a witch. Larry stopped before her and laid down the kitchen-knife he had been absently using on a stick of wood.

"Aunt Littleton," said he, "will you do something for me? "

"'Course I will," said Aunt Littleton. "You ain't cut you with that knife? "

"I want you to go over to the Peachams and see that little Mary Felicia."

"Why, I don't know's I really could poke off over there," said Aunt Littleton. "She's goin' to be married to-morrer, an' they'll be all up in arms."

Larry was busy detaching something from his fob.

"You go over there and make a call. While she's in the room, you say this. Say it to anybody. You needn't say it to her. 'My nephew, Larry Gordon, 's going to England in a week. He's got his stateroom all engaged, and his chum that was going with him is summoned home to California. So he's got the stateroom on his hands.' "

"Why, yes, I know that," said Aunt Littleton, wondering. "But I dunno's they'll be much concerned with 't."

"Oh, they might as well think I'm a person of importance," said Larry. "You just tell 'em I've got a whole stateroom on my hands, and if I can't get anybody to go with me, I'm going alone."

"Well!" said Aunt Littleton.

Larry was queer, she knew, with a queerness that presupposed his mysterious knack at building churches; but this was the oddest streak of all.

"There's another thing," said he. "I want that little Mary Felicia to have a wedding present. You take this ring —"

"Why," said Aunt Littleton, caught by the glow of the deep-blue stones and wondering more and more, "that's your mother's ring, the one you give her."

"Yes," said Larry, "I gave it to her after my first job. And mother gave it back to me those last days, and said, 'When you find a girl —' Well, well! I'm going to give it to that little Mary Felicia. Now, Aunt Littleton, do exactly what I tell you. You get her by herself —"

"Why, it's as much as your life is worth," said Aunt Littleton. "They'll keep close watch of her these last days."

"Can't help that. You do it. Call out when you're going down the path and she'll run to see what's got you. Then slip this into her hand and say, 'He sent it to you.' Just that. No more."

"I ain't goin' on any such fool's errand," said Aunt

Littleton. "What do you s'pose I should have to say to Mis' Peacham when she comes out, too?"

"Say a wasp stung you. Here's your shawl. Oh, get your bonnet! I can't wait."

Aunt Littleton firmly put aside the old blanket shawl he was pressing on her, the one Uncle Pike had been using for a rug when he wanted to step on the newly painted floor.

"If I'm goin'," said she, "I guess I'll go decent, an' not as if 'twas winter weather an' I come out o' the ark. Larry Gordon, I never see your beat. You've only got to whistle an' anybody'll go anywheres you say, an' if they make a fool o' themselves it's all one to you."

But she took her umbrella and set forth down the road, and the little ring was in her hand. As for Larry, he walked up and down the garden path until she hove in sight again, and then he hurried forth to meet her. Aunt Littleton looked more than agitated; her worried forehead wove itself into a map of lines, and across its moist surface her hair strayed in wisps, as if she had brushed it by a hand distraught.

"Larry," said she, "what under the sun do you s'pose has happened?"

"I don't know, Aunt Littleton. I don't know." He slipped his hand under her elbow beguilingly and led her on. "Tell what you heard, now there's a dear."

"I dunno," said Aunt Littleton, "whether you've got me into some kind of a hurrah's nest with them foolish messages nor whether you ain't. You needn't be so coaxin'. I'll tell ye fast enough. Le's se' down here on

the door-step. My knees are as weak as water. Well, I went in an' se' down, an' Mary Felicia wa'n't there. But Mis' Peacham was, an' so was he, both in rockin'-chairs, lookin' at each other, an' she was pale as a cloth an' he was red as fire. An' there was the dishes in the sink, an' the milk-pails settin' just as he brought 'em in. An' I realized wherever my place was, certain it wa'n't there. I tried to make talk, but I vow if they heard me ary one of 'em, an' there I stood like a fool, that ring clutched in my hand, an' the stones a-cuttin' me. I can see the mark now. An' 'fore I turned to go, the door opened an' in come Mary Felicia, all dressed up in her Sunday hat, the one with that old pink rose, an', if you'll believe it, she had on her gloves. An' Peacham an' Mis' Peacham no more see me than you see the dead. They just looked at Mary Felicia, an' if his look could ha' killed, I guess 'twould then, an' Mis' Peacham wrinkled up her face as if she's goin' to cry.

“ ‘Mary Felicia,’ says Peacham, ‘where you been?’ An’ Mary Felicia stood there in the middle o’ the kitchen, an’ she held her head so high I thought, my soul! it’d touch the ceilin’. ‘Where I told you,’ says she. ‘I’ve been to see Aaron Randolph.’ By that time I’d made myself pretty small, I can tell ye. I’d got outside the door, but there was that ring diggin’ into my hand. I dunno what got hold o’ me. I guess I was addled, take it all in all, an’ I give a kind of a cough, an’ I says: ‘Here’s a bee. Mary Felicia, you come an’ take it out.’ ‘What is it, Mis’ Littleton?’ says she, an’ she run to the door, an’ I ketched her hand an’ I jammed the ring into it, an’ I says, ‘That

was Larry's mother's, an' he's sent it to you.' Now d'you ever see a bigger fool 'n I be?"

"You're a love," said Larry. He was in an ecstasy of delight, and he kissed her pink cheek resoundingly. He knew Aunt Littleton liked them loud. They seemed more affectionate so. "Did you say the other thing, about my going abroad?"

"No, I didn't," said she. "I never once thought on't. An' I guess you wouldn't, either, if you'd seen them Peachams settin' there lookin' at Mary Felicia. You'd thought you'd git out while 'twas so you could."

All that forenoon Larry made a great deal of noise. He sang, he whistled, he repeated poetry to Aunt Littleton, and once he told her he did not ask a kiss, he did not ask a smile, and said it with such seriousness that she returned: "There! there! I guess you want your dinner early." And at dinner he asked Uncle Pike if he could recall that other spring and having vine leaves in his hair. But they were all used to Larry. Uncle Pike also had concluded long ago that his being so remarkable was one of the conditions of his being so queer.

After dinner Larry disappeared, but when Aunt Littleton had changed her dress and placed herself by the grape-window, she saw her nephew coming up the path. He was singing what she thought a pretty song, and he looked gay and young.

"Larry," said she, "I guess you won't never grow up. Where you be'n?"

Larry came to the window and rested his arms on the sill.

"I've been over to see Aaron Randolph," he said.

Aunt Littleton laid her sewing down.

"You have?" said she. "You ain't been meddlin' about Mary Felicia?"

"Well, her name did come into the conversation," said Larry. "But I went to have him make out a paper, that's all."

"You ain't been an' sold the place?"

"No," said Larry soberly. "I don't believe I shall sell it. We may want to come here summers. Aunt Littleton, I've asked him to make me out a license. I'm going to marry Mary Felicia."

"My soul an' body!" said Aunt Littleton, "be you crazed? How long do you think 'tis sence you've even heard the mention of her name?"

"Centuries," said Larry. "And I'm going over now to tell her so."

Mary Felicia was not expecting him. But she saw him coming and met him in the garden walk. She looked shy and very beautiful; but she held herself proudly and she wore the sapphire ring. Larry saw Aunt Peacham at the window and Uncle Peacham over by the well. So he put his arms about Mary Felicia and kissed her soberly.

"Little love," said he, "I didn't say a word to you about your brother, did I?"

"No," said Mary Felicia.

"Well," said Larry, "I rather think we can hang on to him together. Anyhow, we'll try."

And seeing Aunt Peacham in the doorway now and Uncle Peacham advancing from the well, he put her hand to his lips and kissed it, and then, holding it, led her on to meet them.



## A HOMESPUN WIZARDRY

“**A** IN’T you got a lot of old-fashioned furniture!” said Alonzo Street.

He had been up in the shed chamber after a piece of leather to mend the bellows, and he had been gone so short a time that Aunt Fellows looked up from the kettle where she was testing the potatoes in the stew and frowned at him, as nearly as she could compass it. She was a large, soft, sandy woman who went about clump, clump all day in cloth shoes and managed to do a good deal of work; and she never could see how Alonzo, the stepson of brother Hiram from the state of Maine, come to help her and her husband through the winter, could be in one place and then in another before you could turn round. Alonzo was not the wiry, cat-like creature one expected to move fast. He was a great, broad-shouldered fellow with a strong crop of yellow hair and direct, kind blue eyes; but he used his feet, Aunt Fellows told him, as if he were dancing. At the mention of the old furniture her blond face fell, and she looked for a moment as if she were going to cry.

“That’s Alma’s,” said she. “’Most that whole year ’fore she was sick she spent drivin’ round the country pickin’ up old things. An’ then she come in one day an’ took to her bed, an’ she says, ‘Mother, I ain’t goin’ to

get up no more.' An' she ain't been up sence, except as you see her a little while every day to make her bed an' save me steps."

"Sho!" said Alonzo. "Don't she take any interest in the furniture?"

"Why, no," said Aunt Fellows, beginning to dish out the stew and frowning over the steam that came up in her face. "She don't take no interest in anything. That's the way 'tis. So doctor says. He's told me the name o' the disease, but I don't need nobody to tell me. I've seen it before when I wa'n't more'n eighteen myself. She's in a decline, 'Lonzo, she's in a decline."

"Hold on," said Alonzo. "There she is, comin'."

He began to regard his leather thoughtfully and whistle. Alma opened the door that shut off the kitchen from the stairs, and stepped in with an impulsive haste, as if she wanted to get it over. She was dark and slender, with brown eyes richly fringed and a pointed chin. Alonzo used to wish she would use her teeth for something besides her spare eating. He would have liked to see them bared in a frank laugh; for once he had caught her yawning when she thought nobody was by, and the inside of her mouth looked to him like a jewel casket, all red velvet and ivory. She wore to-day a dark-blue dress made with the utmost plainness, and immediately on entering she girded herself with an apron.

"Give me the platter, mother," she said. "I'll carry it in."

But Alonzo had dropped his leather and was before her.

"I'm head waiter in this house," said he. "Your

mother 'n' I made this stew. She put it together an' I smelt of it all along the line. We ain't goin' to have any interference with our broth."

He was always pelting her with silly talk. But she wouldn't catch and throw back the ball. She wouldn't even smile.

Just then father came in from the shed, and they sat down to dinner. Father was thin and dark like Alma, and he wore nowadays a thick, worried scowl between the brows because his girl was "pindlin'." When he was in the room with her he watched her with hurried glances "like a link," Mrs. Fellows said, because she had asked him for goodness' sake not to stare at Alma and make her think she wouldn't live the day out. So father abandoned his staring, but the "link" glances were beyond his control. Alonzo, according to his custom, talked all through the meal, foolishly sometimes, laughing at his own folly, and then giving father a chance at argument on some topic that demanded good hard sense. But wherever the wind of his talk went, it couldn't raise a ripple on the face of the silent girl. She ate a little, languidly, and that because father begged her, in a hurried beseeching, as if he were afraid mother would catch him and tell him not to be too exciting, to "eat a morsel even if she didn't feel to." When the meal was three-quarters over, Mrs. Fellows realized that she herself felt "as nervous as a witch, 'Lonzo did clatter on so." She almost thought it was bad for Alma to have him in the house, with his great laugh and his challenging voice. But as it began to seem to her that she couldn't bear to sit there a minute longer hearing Alonzo saying foolish things,

the meal was over, and she could draw a long breath. When they rose from the table father went out to harness, and Alonzo sat down with the bellows.

"Alma, don't you do a dish," said Mrs. Fellows. "I'll put away the butter an' things, but you let the dishes set just as they be till we get home."

"You goin' to the street?" Alma asked, with no interest. She was piling dishes in a painstaking, serious way, as if even that took more will than she could summon.

"Yes. Father's got to go to the blacksmith's, an' I think I might as well pick me out a linin' for that new quilt."

She disappeared into the bedroom to don her all-wool, and Alma went slowly on picking up dishes. Yet when they were in neat piles she seemed to have no further interest in them; and mother, coming out with her shawl to warm lest the cold of the best room should chill her at the outset, nodded in relief.

"That's right," said she. "You leave the dishes. I shall be home 'fore dark."

Alma lay down on the kitchen lounge and shut her eyes. But when she heard the sleigh-bells jangling out of the yard she got up, and, with no change in her painstaking way of doing a task too heavy for her, began to wash the dishes. Alonzo, coming whistling in to his bellows-mending, found her at the sink.

"Hullo!" said he. "Good girl! Don't you want I should wipe?"

Alma shook her head. She seemed to have just strength enough to put into her task and none at all for speech.

"All right," said Alonzo. "But I used to help mother. She was laid up half the time while I was a boy."

"So she was," said Alma, with a sudden interest. "It was her nerves, too, wa'n't it?"

"Oh, yes," said Alonzo cheerfully, as if it didn't make much difference what it was so long as you were sick. "An' she'd never got over it either if I hadn't studied on it an' found out what's the matter."

"Why, that's the matter," said Alma. "Doctor says so — nerves."

"What's nerves, anyhow?" said Alonzo, as if he were laying ghosts. "*I* don't know. But I know this. Make anybody have a good time enough, an' they can't stop to think whether they've got nerves or not."

"Good time!"

Her face quivered, and she left her idle hands resting on the edge of the pan. Alonzo glanced up at her and then, as if he didn't intend to meet that mood in her, went on:

"Yes. Mother never'd had a good time. Do you remember my father?"

"No," said Alma. "I never saw him."

"Well, he wa'n't my own father, you know. Mother was married twice. I don't remember my real father at all. But near's I can make out, they were both alike. Good men as you ever see in your life; but they'd both of 'em set themselves a job, an' 'twas the same kind o' job. 'Twas to see how much they could rake an' scrape an' save before they were underground. An' 'twas up to mother to help. Here — you give me that towel."

Alma was really tired now, and he saw it. She noted with approval that, before he began to wipe the plates, he washed the leather smell from his hands, and he wiped with a deft dispatch. Alma sat down in the rocking-chair and watched him. It didn't seem to matter who wiped the dishes so long as mother was spared. But she wanted to hear the rest of the story, and that Alonzo seemed to know.

"I studied on it a good deal while I was growin' up," said he. "I'd keep sayin' to myself, 'Mother works like a dog; but she don't want to. I don't believe there's a livin' thing mother wants to do.' Then I wondered why. There were plenty o' things I wanted to do, so many I couldn't get round to 'em. I was a good deal of a numskull, an' I studied on it a long time; but one day, quick as a streak o' lightnin', it flashed into my head. 'Why,' I says, 'mother ain't interested in doin' things because there ain't anything interestin' to do.' Well, I couldn't do anything about it as things were then; but pretty soon father died, an' the first thing I did after the funeral was to say, 'Mother, you look like the dickens in that old chocolate calico. You come up to the store with me an' pick you out a blue one.'"

"What'd she say?" Alma inquired.

There was a faint gleam of interest in her eyes. Alonzo laughed.

"'Why,' she says, 'Lonzo, I'm ashamed of you. An' your father ain't been gone a week.' 'Well,' says I, 'mother, you ride over to the store with me an' pick you out a blue calico, or I'll go alone an' buy you a red one. An' how'd you feel then?'"

"What'd she say to that?" asked Alma, with an augmented interest.

"Oh, she went, all right, after a week or two. An' when I got her started we had a real good time, mother an' me. Mother was pretty near a well woman up to the last three months of her life."

"I used to like pretty things," said Alma musingly. "I don't like 'em now, though. What's the use?"

Alonzo had finished his plates, baking-dishes and all, and now he carried them into the pantry in assorted piles; and Alma, watching him from her chair, wondered to see how unerringly he found the places where they lived. Then he came back, wiped out the sink with the proper cloth, and hung up his dish-pan most triumphantly.

"Why," said he, betaking himself to his low chair and the litter of leather and tools beside it, "that's all the use there is to pretty things."

"What?"

"To keep us alive. Make us take an interest."

"Take an interest in what?" asked Alma scornfully.

"Livin'. Why, it keeps me alive to think maybe some day I'll have a better fiddle than that miserable little contraption I've got up-stairs. Keeps me alive, I tell you. Clothes, too — women's clothes. I'm as lively as a grig when your mother puts on that worked collar an' cameo pin. Oh no, don't you go to markin' down pretty things an' sayin' they're no good. They be."

Alma glanced involuntarily at the apron over her dark dress. At least, the woman in her said, the apron

was a check. Alonzo was laughing now, rather shamefacedly.

"I don't hardly dare to ask you," he said, "but there's somethin' I wish you'd let me do."

Alma took fright. Perhaps father had told him to persuade her to a walk. Perhaps mother wanted her to take some new kind of medicine.

"I just love pretty things," said Alonzo. "I hate homely ones, an' I can't bear to live with 'em. An' I hate that pine bureau in my room."

Alma thought he was a little crazy now. To hate a pine bureau was what she herself had heartily done before she gave up the difficult business of living, but she never knew a six-foot man to show like sensitiveness.

"I hate to speak of it," said Alonzo, "'specially to your mother. Seems if it would be kind of impudent, in her house an' all. But up in the shed chamber this mornin' I come on some old furniture."

"No! no!" cried Alma. Her face was twisted into a grief he saw in the one glance he took, and determined he would not see again. "Don't you speak to me about the things up there. Don't you speak to me."

"'Tis kind of fresh," said Alonzo quietly. "But there's one bureau there that's 'most all to pieces. Should you be willin' to ask your mother if I could glue it up an' put on a coat o' somethin' or other an' rub it down, an' have it up in my room?"

"Take anything you want to," said Alma breathlessly, "every single thing that's up there. Only don't let me see 'em, that's all."

"Then I'll tell your mother I'm goin' to work on



the bureau," said Alonzo pleasantly, as if there were no question of excitement in the air. "Warm days I can work on it up where 'tis. Yes, I can set up that little salamander your father had to dry the plaster when your room was fixed. Seems terrible childish for me to be so set on an old-fashioned bureau; but I be, an' that's all there is to it."

Alma was trembling.

"I've been set on it myself," she said. "But that's over now. I've no use for bureaus nor anything else."

She got hastily up, and with her face turned away from him ran up the stairs. Alonzo thought he heard a sound of crying in the room above, and he whistled loudly the "White Cockade." But when he thought the crying had had time to die down, his whistle died, too, and he worked very soberly until uncle and aunt drove in.

The next morning Alma did not come down-stairs at all, and Aunt Fellows looked serious.

"Ain't she so well?" Alonzo ventured to ask at dinner-time; and Aunt Fellows, looking puzzled, shook her head and answered sadly:

"Somethin's upset her. She says she don't want to be disturbed, an' when she's hungry she'll slip down to the cupboard. But I guess I'll carry her up a tray."

"That's right," said Alonzo cordially, "a good heavy one."

"Why," said Aunt Fellows, frowning now, in her perplexity, "doctor said I wa'n't to do it. He said if she got in the habit of eatin' up there she'd give up the more."

"There's somethin' in that," said Alonzo. "But

seems to me he might ha' gone a step further. Alma's a good girl, an' if you should go up puffin' an' blowin' under a heavy tray she'd come down the sooner."

"Yes," said Aunt Fellows thoughtfully, "Alma's a good girl."

"An' don't you let uncle lift a finger to the tray, an' don't you let me," Alonzo counseled her. "You jest make it good an' heavy an' puff on the way."

"Well," said Aunt Fellows, "seems's if there's some sense in that; but I dunno's I want to go playin' tricks on Alma jest because she's down an' can't help herself."

"Get to," said Alonzo cheerfully. "If she was down with a fever an' wanted to drink out o' the ink-bottle because there wa'n't no water in the room, wouldn't you tell her the ink-bottle's empty?"

"Why," said Aunt Fellows, "I never heard of anybody's cravin' ink."

Alonzo laughed. Then he whistled.

"Say, aunt," said he, when he had finished the "Road to Boston," "should you jest as soon I'd do over that old bureau in the shed chamber?"

"Why," said Aunt Fellows, aghast, "that's Alma's bureau. That was the fust piece she bought when she begun ridin' round the country pickin' up old things."

"Sho!" said Alonzo. "Well, she don't seem to be takin' much interest in it now."

"Why, no," said Aunt Fellows, "that's jest how it is. She said she never wanted to see the things ag'in, an' so your uncle an' I we agreed we'd let 'em set there an' never once mention 'em."

"There!" said Alonzo. "I thought so. Might as well let me fiddle with it. 'Twon't hurt Alma, an' 'twon't

hurt you. I'm possessed to get at it. There's something about that bureau that's bewitched me."

"Well," said Aunt Fellows doubtfully, "don't seem as if it'd do any harm. I'll speak to father."

Uncle saw no harm in turning a broken-ankled bureau into a shiny one that sat square on its feet. He even thriftily considered that if Alma were not going to prize the things any more they might be sold for at least as much as she gave for them to pay the doctor's bill. So Alonzo set up the salamander in the shed chamber, and on snowy days, when he and uncle couldn't get into the woods, glued and rubbed and polished, and whistled always at his work. And one day as he came down hot and breathless, for the salamander had been impetuous, he saw a red sleigh in the yard and a personable young man getting into it.

"Who's that?" he asked Aunt Fellows.

She was standing by the kitchen table, her hand on it as if she needed some support, and her tired face was pink. Aunt Fellows looked younger by ten years.

"That's Ellery Williams," said she. It had not been possible to keep the triumph out of her voice. The tones of it glowed and throbbed with more emotion than Alonzo had ever connected with Aunt Fellows. "He's the son of our representative. He's been out west lookin' after some kind of a mine for his father. We ain't seen him for quite a while."

Alonzo seemed hardly to listen to her. He was sniffing like a cat that suspects the presence of her favorite herb.

"What's that?" said he. "Seems's if I know that smell."

"It's violets," said Aunt Fellows. Her voice had gathered an added shade of richness. "I took 'em out o' the box. I've jest carried 'em up to her."

"Oh!" said Alonzo. "Smells to me like a funeral."

"Why, 'Lonzo," said Aunt Fellows, "I should think you'd be ashamed to say a thing like that. Smells to me"—she continued, and a triumph too high to be controlled lifted her voice again—"smells to me like suthin' else."

"A weddin'?" asked Alonzo. He, too, had emotions he couldn't at the moment quell. "Don't you be too sure o' that."

Just then uncle came in. He had been standing in the road watching the whirling progress of the sleigh.

"Well, father," said Mrs. Fellows, in her voice of exultant prophecy, "what d'you think o' that?"

"I dunno," said uncle. He seemed to be quite dazed by sleigh and violets. Then he gathered himself to meet the moment. "I guess," said he, "there ain't but one thing *to* think."

That noon Alma did not come down to dinner. The heavy trays had been reaping their result now for over a week, and she had been faltering down for a part of every meal. But to-day when she failed to come her mother was not depressed. She nodded at father across the table.

"Too much excitement," she said. "I guess it's kinder tired her out; but some ways o' bein' tired's better'n bein' rested. Don't you say so, father?"

That afternoon father told Alonzo he might as well harness up, for he'd got to get the colt sharpened, and mother thought she'd go, too. Alonzo did it with ex-

treme haste, and when they had driven out of the yard he stood watching them as father had watched the young man. Only there was no relief on Alonzo's face. It was very grave. When the last jingle of bells had died on the air, he walked slowly into the house, kicking the snow as he went, as if even his feet had some doubt in themselves of the way they'd better go. He ran up the stairs to the shed chamber and looked critically about. It was very warm. He had had a fire there that morning, and the salamander still sent out a pleasing heat. Alonzo tucked in another stick. Then he got the broom and dust-pan and carefully brushed up some chips and the dust of old wood. There was a last year's cobweb on the window, and he pulled it down and gave the panes a brush.

"There!" said he.

As well as he could manage it his stage was set. He went down into the kitchen and then up the kitchen stairs. It was very quiet before Alma's door. He could imagine her sitting, her violets in her hand, in a trance of happiness. Alonzo knocked, and then because he had never knocked at her door before, he was frightened.

"Who's that?" said Alma.

"It's me," said Alonzo. Now that he heard his own voice his courage all came back. "I want you to hurry up down-stairs. I've got to show you something."

There was a silence, long enough, he thought, for her to open the door if she were coming. But her voice came finally, very gentle, as if she meant to persuade him not to urge her.

"Why, 'Lonzo, I don't feel to."

"You got to," said Alonzo. "If you ain't able to walk downstairs when I ask you to, I'll come in an' carry you down."

"Why, 'Lonzo," said the gentle voice, "you ain't hurt you? You ain't cut yourself choppin'?"

"No," said Alonzo, "I ain't cut me, but I'm hurt, an' hurt mighty bad. An' you get up out o' bed an' stir yourself an' come down-stairs to see to me."

With that he tramped down into the kitchen, and stood there breathless. But he was not going to let himself be afraid. There was a soft, flying rush behind him, and Alma came, pink from her hurrying, and her pretty face looked earnest with concern.

"I wa'n't abed," she told him. "Where'd you hurt you?"

Alonzo shut the stair door and stood with his back to it.

"I'm hurt," said he, "because nobody's told me there was a feller thinkin' he had a right to come swellin' round here buyin' you violets. I'd ought to been told."

The faint color went out of her cheeks. Her mouth trembled. She looked ill indeed.

"Don't," she said.

"If there is anybody 't you like," said Alonzo, working himself a little deeper into the passion he so hotly felt, "I'd ought to know it. For you're goin' to like me."

Alma was too entirely surprised to heed her own disturbing heart.

"Why," she said, "I do like you."

"Yes," said Alonzo scornfully. "So does your

mother. So would your grandmother, 'f you had one. But you ain't goin' to like me that way. You're goin' to like me more'n all creation an' kingdom come. You an' I ain't any blood relation, Alma, an' sure as a gun you're goin' to marry me."

Alma's mouth was open with amazement. He thought how pretty the pink inside of her lip must be, and almost hated her, instead of loving, because he know the scent of violets hung about her face.

"I didn't mean to open this up to-day," he said. "I jest meant to get you down-stairs, an' into the shed chamber to see what you thought o' my bureau. But his comin' out of a clear sky an' his violets — I ain't got any violets. I've only got a bureau. You come up with me, Alma, 'n' see it."

She had got back a little composure now.

"I ain't ever goin' to set eyes on that furniture again," she said. "I told you so in the beginnin'."

"Yes, you are, too," said Alonzo roughly. "What kind o' fool talk is that? What is there about that furniture more'n any other that it ain't to be looked at? Here! You take this shawl." He snatched Aunt Fellows's blanket shawl from the nail and flung it about her. "An' if you're too weak to go, as sure as I'm a livin' man I'll carry ye."

Alma threw the shawl back at him. He thought she was repudiating all shawls and the quest with them, and wondered what his next move could be.

"You give me my own shawl," she bade him, in the first tone of temper he had heard from her. "That red one there."

Alonzo complied, in innocence of reasons. He was

an astute young man, but even he did not suspect that red was more desirable than gray. Alma went quite meekly now. He opened the kitchen door for her; but she had a wholesome sense of his being behind her. At the stairs she hesitated.

"Run along," said he. "It's cold down here. Don't you like the stairs? I should admire to carry ye."

At that she fled lightly up and into the shed chamber. Once over the sill, she did forget that the furniture there before her was but the ghostly evidence of a bitterly remembered time. For in the forefront stood the bureau, rich in its dull polish and resplendent in old brass.

"O 'Lonzo," said she, "I never see such a sight in my life."

Alonzo glowed with pride.

"Ain't that a beauty?" said he. "You were terrible clever to pick up such nice pieces."

The shadow fell again upon her face.

"To-morrer you an' father move it into your room," she said. "Now le's go down."

"Why, I ain't goin' to have it in my room," said Alonzo, as if in tender patience at her foolishness. "I jest said that to get a wedge in so's I could come up here an' work an' you not stop me. I've done the bureau, an' I'm goin' to do the chairs an' table an' the desk. An' they're all yourn, darlin' dear. Course they're yourn."

Alma turned and faced him. She had grown stiff from head to foot, and her teeth chattered as if with cold.



"Look here," she said. "You might's well know what this furniture means to me. I thought I was goin' to marry the man that come here to-day, an' I've always been bewitched over old furniture; an' I drove round the country pickin' it up to furnish my house."

"Yes," said Alonzo quietly. "I see. I thought 'twas some such way as that."

"Do you know what made me think I was goin' to marry him?" she went on, in a torrent of broken words. "'Twa'n't because he asked me. No. 'Twas because he took me round to places, an' he come here to see me, an' I was a poor little ignorant fool, an' I got it all up. I got it up myself. What do you think o' me now?"

"I'm awful glad you picked up the furniture," said Alonzo cheerfully, "an' glad I know how to do it over. We'll have it in our house, an' every time you see the bureau you'll laugh an' say to yourself, 'That's the first piece 'Lonzo done over. Ain't it grand?'"

Alma was staring at him as if she did not yet fully understand what manner of man he was.

"Why, 'Lonzo," she said, "I never see anybody like you."

"No," said Alonzo, "I never see anybody like you neither — so pretty nor so soft nor so jest right every way."

"An' there's worse to tell you," said Alma. She was not crying now, but looking at him with wide eyes that besought forgiveness. "He kissed me, 'Lonzo. Three times he kissed me. An' I never so much as thought he'd done that if he didn't mean—" Her voice failed her piteously.

Alonzo felt the veins swelling in his forehead and the hunger of his hands to strike. But he spoke evenly and with great gentleness:

"There's only one cure for that."

"What is it?" said Alma, turning on him her grieving look.

"Why," said Alonzo, "you forget about it. An' I don't see how you can manage it unless you let somebody else kiss them kisses all away."

He had not meant to do it. He had seen possession of her a long way off, after she was quite strong again and the blood had come back to her cheeks and laughter to her lips. But he walked over to her where she was leaning against the bureau and took her in his arms, and Alma leaned against him and cried in a way that made him swallow hard and wish his throat didn't hurt him so.

"Don't you forget we ain't any blood relation, will you, honey? You see, it ain't as if we were strangers. All through mother's sickness I used to think of you same as I'd seen you goin' to school, your braid down your back. But I couldn't come 'cause I had to take care o' mother."

"Was that what you came for?" she asked, in her pretty, childish way.

"Yes," said Alonzo. "I wrote to your father an' said I wanted to hire out for the winter. But there's no more need o' my workin' out than the cat needs two tails. I come courtin', darlin' dear, that's what I come for. You ain't goin' to let me go back without any luck, now be you?"

Alma laughed a little here, and he wiped her face with his big handkerchief. But she still had her troubles.

"I don't know what you'll think o' me, though," she said, "off with one an' on with another quick as this."

"Did you see him yesterday?" he asked her.

She withdrew from him and faced him angrily.

"No," said she, "'course I didn't."

"Did you want to?"

"No."

"Where's his violets?" said Alonzo, wounding himself again because the fragrance of them had hurt him so.

She looked him in the face with a perfect honesty.

"I put 'em in a tumbler," she said, "an' set 'em on my table. I didn't smell of 'em — not once, because he'd touched 'em. But they're real pretty. I couldn't take it out o' them."

Alonzo laughed at that and said she was a good girl to be good to violets. And they went down-stairs and sat by the kitchen fire, his arm about her, and planned how they would furnish their living-room in the spring. But when father and mother came jingling into the yard, Alonzo went out to unharness, and mother found Alma quite briskly putting wood into the kitchen stove.

"Why," said Mrs. Fellows, "you've got a high color. You ain't feverish, be you?"

"No," said Alma. "I feel real well."

Mrs. Fellows heaved a sigh.

"Yes," said she, "I believe you're goin' to be all

right now." She laughed a little. "I guess, though," she said slyly, "it took hothouse flowers to do it."

Alma said nothing to that, and presently father and Alonzo came. But it was by way of the shed chamber, and they brought between them, with a ponderous care, the antique bureau.

"For mercy sake!" cried Mrs. Fellows, when she heard the confusion of their march. She threw the door open. "What under the sun you got there?"

Father was one whom no change of circumstance could waken to the queerness of things.

"'Lonzo says Alma thought she'd have this up in her room," he said, unmoved. "Mebbe we'd better try the front stairs."

So the bureau went triumphantly up, and Alma's little pine one was banished to the store-room, and because it was all done so quietly no one was much surprised. But next morning Aunt Fellows, frying bacon for breakfast, had her shock in the vision of a pretty Alma coming down the stairs, clad in bright blue, with a fine lace ruffle at her neck.

"My soul!" said her mother, "you ain't goin' to get up to breakfast, be you?"

"Yes," said Alma. "I've laid abed long enough."

Father and Alonzo were coming in from the shed, and Alma did not look at them. She was busy settling the coffee. But Alonzo knew she would have looked up if she hadn't known it was her lover gazing at her.

"My, ain't that a handsome color!" said he. "I never see such a blue out of a garden-bed in June."

"Don't need but one thing," said Mrs. Fellows, hurrying on the biscuits and speaking with her motherly

slyness. "That's a bunch o' violets pinned on in front."

"I ain't got any violets," said Alma. "They were on my bureau last night, and this mornin' they were froze."

## RED POPPIES

**G**REENFIELD HALE sat in his dark kitchen that warm May evening, the windows opened to the breeze, and played his fiddle. He liked to play at this hour when the world was fading into dark, and it was nuts to him, he once owned to his niece Lucia, on her annual visit, to know the sounds were floating over the field to the ears of his neighbor next door, the sweeter they were to plague him most. Between him and Richard Downs, a third his own age, was a standing feud of the good old sort, over the field that lay between them. Two years ago, it had been for sale — that was the beginning of it all — and Hale had told his neighbor he meant to buy it, but only at a certain price. And when it was auctioned off it ran up amazingly, and once beyond the figure he had specified, Dick Downs, in good faith, began to bid, and the field came to him. But Hale, being prematurely old of a tired heart and confused by the haste and unexpectedness of it all, leaped to the conviction that it was willful treachery and abjured this neighbor who had heretofore been a sort of intimate, playing his bass viol to Hale's violin. At a following town meeting he "dressed him down," the neighbors said, in unmeasured terms, and Richard listened, grim and furious. After that, they spoke no more. But to Hale it was a hateful pleasure to re-

member how Dick had loved to play with him, especially on Sunday evenings, when Lucia, her own tumultuous spirits answering the quietude of the time, would sing with them, and that it must be wormwood to him to hear the fiddle and Lucia's voice without him in their triumphing accord.

The kitchen where the old man sat was dark even by day, with its smoke-stained walls and yawning fireplace: for he was as obstinately set on old ways as in his mental habit, and at his hearth a tin kitchen was the oven decreed. Lucia, breaking the monotony of her dull months in the shoe shop by these intervals with him, took the matter of swinging her kettles from the crane and baking in the brick oven with the gayest cheer. "Mercy sakes!" she said, she guessed a man could have his own way in his own kitchen. 'Twas a pretty tale if he couldn't. Lucia had caught quaint phrases from Grandma Nye, who brought her up, and used them with ease and satisfaction. They smacked of good old ways, and these she found immediate to herself. Besides, she was very fond of Uncle Greenfield, with the added sympathy of according natures, and the more indulgent of him as his tired heart beat less confidently.

To-night she had been out for an hour in the dusk, and when she appeared in the kitchen doorway, Uncle Greenfield ended his tune with a little clever snap of the strings and laid his fiddle down.

"Light up," he said, in a voice that never lost its old imperiousness. He could hear her breathing through the dark. She might have been running or deep in some muscular task. "Been out?" he asked her.

Lucia did not answer for a moment. She lighted the

lamp and disclosed herself to him, trim, compact, scarlet of cheek and lip, a fine, free, flashing girl with, he was wont to say delightedly, a devil in her. But it was a merry devil only, not a wicked one. And the mate to it was what lighted his own black eyes and curved his beautiful thin lips into many kinds of smiles.

"What you want the light for?" she asked him.

"Want to spy on ye," he answered. "Want to know where ye been."

She stood for a moment looking at him meditatively, her black eyes lighted in reflection, but destitute of their usual spark. She was wondering whether it would be best to tell. Then suddenly her face went all over color, and the eyes seemed to break into shimmers of light. She laughed delightedly, pleased, evidently, with herself.

"What makes you think I've been doin' anything?" she evaded.

He drew out his pipe and slowly filled it, watching her meantime with a glance that declared itself innocent of guile.

"You went out," he said. "You didn't say where you was goin'. That's the way your father used to do. Little devil! you're just like him."

But this, she knew, was praise. Her father had been adored and was lamented always. She sat down and folded her firm, plump hands on the table.

"I s'pose if I told you, you'd go and tell," she challenged him.

"S'pose I would?" he inquired, pulling at his pipe. "What makes you s'pose I would?"

"Well," said she, with a delicate and grudging com-



mendation in her tone, "you never've told yet, I'll say that for you. It's about Dick Downs."

He took out his pipe and stared at her, his eyes questioning, the brows bristling like fur.

"You ain't been passin' the time o' day with him?" he asked her. "You been whippin' up an acquaintance over the fence?"

Lucia yawned a little and leaned back in the low chair. She was not afraid of him.

"Why, I've known Dick Downs ever since I was little," she said. "You know I have. When I used to make you a visit in spring term and go to Number Three, we used to trot off holdin' hands, and he carried my dinner-pail, and the boys plagued him for it, and he settled with 'em. Whippin' up an acquaintance? Why, Dick and I were cronies when you were in your cradle."

She was a sassy jade, he had been used to tell her father; but he liked her for it. Still she was not to interfere with his dignified aversions.

"Don't you speak to him, Luce," he warned her. "I won't have it. Sure as you do, you pack your trunk and off you go."

Lucia was unmoved. Again she yawned behind a capable right hand.

"Well, I ain't spoken to him," she conceded. Then her face, that playground of mischiefs, broke up again. "Say, uncle," she besought him, "don't you scold me. I've got to tell you or I sha'n't sleep for a week. I've got to tell!"

"Well," said he, with his severest mien, "tell away. What is it?"

She was overcome with mirth.

"Well," said she, "Dick Downs is color-blind."

"What's that got to do with you?"

"We used to have fun about it, makin' him tell which were the red flowers in teacher's bouquet. And once he had a brown jacket with a red weave in it, and he never knew the red was there, and we made him believe 'twas all over, and he was mad as fire because his mother'd bought it and she had to make him a black one 'fore he'd go to school."

"Well, mebbe he did. What's that to you?"

She clasped her hands on her knee, and gave way to ecstasy.

"O Uncle Green!" she said, "it'll make him mad as fire. You know how he's sowed down this field?"

Hale nodded, with lips compressed. He had been mending the fence when Richard did his sowing, and he thought it disrespectful in so young a man to go on walking back and forth in silence, scattering seed, when an older man was near. Yet if Richard had spoken, he would not have answered. Perhaps that was what he wanted, to be hailed and not to speak. Lucia was laughing with an ever-bubbling mirth.

"I heard him tell Deacon Whitcomb what he meant to do with the field. You'd thought 'twas the greatest thing anybody ever undertook. The sorrel had got in. He was goin' to see what deep plowin' would do. There wa'n't goin' to be a weed. Then he was goin' to roll it —"

"Well," conceded her uncle, with a grudging justice, "he has rolled it. 'Tis a pretty sight."

"Well, it'll be prettier before summer's over."

He looked at her in dark suspicion.

"You ain't been tearin' up a man's work?" he said. "I don't hold to that. If you've done that, you'll have it made right and you'll foot the bill."

"I've footed it beforehand," said Lucia. She was quite unmoved. "I sent for me three ounces of poppy-seed, and I mixed it with dirt, and I've been throwin' it by handfuls far as ever I could, and come July, his field'll be bloomed out in poppies, red as blood."

"Well, that won't hurt it nor him either," said her uncle. He was glad it proved no worse. "I don't see's that's much of a joke."

"Oh, but he won't know it, and we shall be seein' 'em bloom and he'll think they're the color o' grass. And some day somebody'll tell him about 'em, and he'll know I did it. It's a kind of a letter to him, uncle — it's a writin' on the wall."

He was watching her closely. She was endlessly delightful to him in her piquing changes.

"Well," he asked, "what's in the letter? What's the writin' say?"

But Lucia was instantly sleepy. She got up, considered aloud whether she should make bread, and took the cat under her arm.

"Night, uncle," she said, with her most honeyed smile. "You just wait till next July."

So he waited, forgetting such child's play, indeed, in the reveries of a man who did not, he owned to himself, feel as much like work as common, and absorbed more and more in fiddle reveries, because they were unchanged. But Lucia waited with the impatience of a child. She watched Richard going back and forth, yet without

seeming to lift an eyelid, and once when old Ann March failed him on washing day, she saw him, the next Sunday morning, himself hanging out his clothes. She was seated in the back porch shelling peas for dinner, and Uncle Greenfield sat near by, reading the life of Lincoln, his concession to the seriousness of the day, to be laid aside presently for an interval with the hymn tunes also conformable and more beloved.

"It's a shame!" Lucia burst forth.

She had spoken before prudence had time to hinder. He looked up at her.

"What's a shame?" he asked.

"Oh, nothin'! Yes, 'tis, too. It's a shame Dick Downs is doin' his own washin'! What a way to live! He'd ought to marry, that's what he ought to do."

"Well," said Uncle Greenfield absently, "they say he's goin' with Mary Keith. If he gets her, she'll keep him up to the mark."

The pan of unshelled peas slid from her lap, and she plunged for it.

"There! there!" said Uncle Greenfield, "don't you move so quick. You go like a dart. Can't nobody keep up with ye."

She was soberly picking up the pods. Though her head was low, the color had gone out of her face and the mouth quivered perceptibly. Uncle Greenfield thought she was going to cry.

"There! there!" he said again gently, thinking he had hurt her, for after all she was nothing but a child. "It's well you can move quick. Shows how young you be. I guess some o' the rest on us wish we could go like a cat, same's you do."

That afternoon she saw them, Dick and Mary Keith, driving slowly past. Mary had on her new green muslin — Lucia knew well how the lace collar came up round her white throat to the golden line of her hair — and Dick looked as unlike as possible to a man who did his own washing. He sat straight and tall, and his square shoulders seemed to her to fill the world. Opposite the field he drew in his horse, and they began looking at his house, seen from the bare east side. Dick even gesticulated, and pointed with his whip. Lucia knew what he was saying. He was telling Mary they could throw out a piazza there, and set woodbine round it. Lucia knew that was what she would do. But Mary Keith was looking now at the field. She bent forward and peered across him, and now Dick himself looked. She was telling him about the poppies, Lucia knew. Suddenly he gave Mary the reins and jumped out over the wheel. He took a flying leap over the board fence and Lucia, while she loved the muscular splendor of it, strengthened herself in a pang of disgust that a man could put himself out to perform for Mary Keith. Dick had searched about and now, recognizing it by the shape, he picked a poppy. He held it up to Mary and she nodded. Then he picked another, and here Lucia kept a tight hold upon herself, lest she call to them, "Those are my poppies. You let my poppies be!" But Dick was stepping soberly over the fence, and before he got into the wagon he put out his hand and gave Mary Keith the scarlet flowers. She bent over them, and Lucia thought she was setting them at her belt. Then Dick had taken the reins from her and they drove away.

The peas for dinner were very sweet, but Lucia had a headache, she said, and hardly ate at all.

"You better lay down," Uncle Greenfield bade her. "'Long about five o'clock I'm goin' to poke off up to the buryin'-ground and see if they've fixed them stones. I sha'n't be back afore six."

Lucia did go up to her chamber, but it was only to escape his kind solicitude. For the first time, she blamed Uncle Greenfield. She almost hated him. What business had a man to get up a quarrel with an unoffending neighbor, and drag everybody else into it? She sat there at her window overlooking the poppy field, gloom in her eyes and at her heart the sick feeling of irrevocable deeds. The afternoon slipped by and the country road was still. Everybody, she knew, had gone another way. On a day like this, with the breeze right and a booming sea from yesterday's high wind, those who had teams would drive to the Point. Only the solitary, like Dick Downs who had some one to be deliciously alone with, would take the other road, stop at Langham for supper and come home by moonlight. Lucia, thirsty for the pleasures fitted to her pulsing youth, planned it all out for them, and thought, in her innocence of what age is, that she felt old. It was after six and Uncle Greenfield had not come. The world grew stiller every minute, and suddenly the quiet of it was unbearable. She was not thinking now, only driven by a tumultuous frenzy stronger far than she. It took her from her low chair there by the window and blew her out of doors, over the fence — she climbed it lightly, thinking with a swift, sick pang of Dick's high jump — and ran through the soft ground to the wilding

poppies. It had been a good season for them, and they had taken root in multitudes. There they burned and trembled to the breeze, gay, silken ladies, full of pride and languor. She bent to them and began picking swiftly with deft motions of her clever hands, and when the bruised bunch crowded she held them under her arms, and the poppy juice splashed her and stained her dress, the sleeves rolled high, and with the wine of them upon her, and the strange medicinal odor rising, she felt drunk with the acrid magic of it all, and the significance of them touched her in a dreamy way she could not have interpreted, the trance that means forgetfulness, the beauty that allures. The blood was in her face from her rage of life, and stooping over the flowers, she saw a dark cloud now instead of the green, red-stained field. And suddenly there came a voice behind her, one she had not heard all summer long.

“What you doin’ here?” Dick Downs was asking her. “What you doin’ in my field?”

She turned and faced him, the bruised poppies held tightly to her breast. She looked at him straight, wishing the dark cloud would let her see more clearly, and asking her heart, all in a panic suddenly, whether he was angry with her. He did not seem to be. He stood there, hat off, the light on his yellow hair and sanguine face, and to Lucia he looked all golden, like the gods she had never heard of, but for whom there is a cry in every maiden’s heart. Suddenly her rage again enveloped her.

“I don’t care whether it’s your field nor whether it ain’t,” she told him. “I’m pickin’ my poppies, that’s what I’m doin’, and you can do as you see fit.”

"Are them poppies — all of 'em?"

He bent forward, looking at them curiously, and Lucia could have laughed, it was so exactly like the way he had stared those years ago when they told him his jacket was all red.

"Yes," she said. "They're poppies. They're mine."

He had straightened, and now he was looking at her, moved, she saw, contemplative yet not angry.

"Yours, be they?" he was saying. "How come they to be yours?"

Lucia had meant to tell him some time, but never in this way. Yet everything was changed, now that Mary Keith had come into the game, and she would tell him as hatefully as might be. She would have a feud with him, like uncle. It would be easier so.

"They're my poppies," she said, "because I sowed 'em."

His mouth twitched a little. He seemed on the point of laughing at her, and it made her furious.

"How'd you manage it?" he asked. But she was dumb, thinking out the most cruel thing to say, and he added, "What'd you do it for?"

"I wanted some poppies," Lucia answered haughtily. "I've got 'em, too." She looked down at the silken, weeping mass in her arms, and added irrepressibly, "All but two. And I know what became of 'em. I know as well as I want to. You gave them away to Mary Keith. If she was here, I'd pull 'em out of her belt and slap her with 'em."

"Why, you little devil!" said Dick. He was smiling broadly now. This was what Uncle Greenfield called



her at her worst, and from him, she knew, it meant indulgent love. "What do you want 'em for?"

"Because I want 'em," she said obstinately. "They're my poppies." She turned away from him. "I'm goin' now. I've tracked up your seeded field, and I don't care if I have. It's uncle's field by rights. You've no business with it anyways."

"Hang the field!" he roared after her. "I wish the field was sunk."

She heard his stride behind her, and in her haste her little shoes sank further into the soft mold. His hand was on her shoulder and he whirled her round.

"Lucy, don't cry," he begged, almost in tears himself, at so piteous a sight. "O Lucy, what you cryin' for?"

She looked down because she would not face him, and saw her arms splashed with poppy stain, and in her general sorrow for herself the stain might have been blood. For the moment the poppies seemed to be roses, wounding her with thorns.

"It's my arms," she said, sobbing. "I've hurt my arms. The briers —"

He had loosed her hands and torn the poppies from her. There they lay at her feet, a bruised, flaring ruin of silk and splendor.

"Little fool!" said Dick. "Pretty arms! darlin' arms! O Luce, why ain't you spoke to me all summer?"

But she couldn't speak to him now, because there in the open field he was kissing her, and for the moment she laid her face against his coat and clung to him. Suddenly she pushed him from her.

"Where's Mary Keith?" she cried. "Oh, I'm ashamed of both of us!"

He laughed, and drew her back again, but she resisted.

"Mary Keith?" he said. "I've been tellin' Mary Keith about you, and how if she took me she'd take a man that hadn't much to give her but to say he'd stick to her through thick and thin. And she wouldn't take me, and I respected her for it. I told her I wouldn't if I's in her place."

"But you asked her," she flashed at him jealously. "You'd have married her."

"I'd marry a dozen girls, one after the other," said Dick—he was the savage now—"to show you you couldn't stop speakin' to me a whole summer and not get punished for it. What'd you sow these for, you little spitfire?"

She was crying softly.

"I didn't sow 'em," she said, in piteous intervals. "I wrote 'em. 'Twas a letter, Dick, to you. I thought somebody'd tell you they were here and you'd remember how I was pickin' 'em in Gran'ma Nye's garden that time, and you come in and asked me what color they were, and I said, 'Red, and they're the handsomest flower that blows.' And you said, 'That's you, Luce. You're the handsomest flower that blows.' And I ain't a spitfire. Only I thought you might remember."

He stood looking at her in hopeless wonder over the feminine that lays its labyrinth underground when the straight, sunlit path would serve.

"Yes," he said, "I remember. But what'd you stop speakin' to me for?"

"Why, I had to," she flamed. "Uncle stopped — and he's got heart-disease."

But whether he took that for a cogent reason, it did not matter. They were in their dream, and every instant the walls that shut them from the outer world grew magically higher.

"Lucy!" came a voice into the dream. "Where be you, Lucy?"

She started from him, torn from her paradise by the old summons to silly spite.

"It's uncle," she told him breathlessly. "We can't do this, Dick. We can't speak. It would kill him, pretty nigh. I shouldn't dare to. Good-by, dear. Oh, good-by!"

He let her go, eagerly almost, she thought, and strode off to the fence bordering the road. She climbed the fence on her side, and dropped lightly into her own yard, and there was Uncle Greenfield, tired, dazed even, it seemed, standing in the porch. He was relieved to see her. When he was tired he felt alone, and, knowing that, she went up to him and put a hand on his arm, and persuaded him into his big chair. He seemed pathetically old and frail, his dark eyes full of the pathos of age that recognizes its own face at last. It was not sadness in the look, it was not regret or any poignancy of pain. But he had been thinking of moving things and they abode with him.

"What do you s'pose, Lucy?" he said, when his breath was equable again. "I found the lot was mowed, and somebody'd left the hay in a little cock t'other side the wall. And Hiram Soule was passin' by, and I asked him who he s'posed done it, and he said 'twas young

Downs over here, thinkin' I wa'n't gettin' about so much as common."

Some one was at the side of the house. His foot was on the step, and Uncle Greenfield had no time for a repulse.

"Mr. Hale," said Dick, "I don't know's you want to talk business Sunday, but I come over to ask if you'll made me an offer for that field."

Uncle Greenfield sat and looked at the floor musingly and Lucia slid a step nearer and touched his arm.

"Well, no, Dick," said he, gently, as became one who had been thinking that afternoon about the end of mortal things. "I don't know's I've got any use for real estate, unless 'twas to leave it to Lucy here, for sowin' blooms; but if you'd step over this evenin' with your bass viol, mebbe we could jine in and Lucy'd sing a hymn."

## ANN ELIZA

“**W**HAT you doin’?” called Celia from the bedroom where she lay with her work about her on the bed: her crocheted edging, some squares of patchwork she had been fitting to an intricate pattern, and a calico wrapper from which she was to take the basting threads. Celia had made up her mind not to call out to her sister once that forenoon; but when the silence had lasted until she became conscious of the clock’s ticking in the next room, she felt that she could not deny herself an imaginative glimpse at the picture there.

“Bindin’ round the skirt,” came in a brisk voice from the kitchen where Ann Eliza sat at her dressmaking. “I’m goin’ to press in a minute, an’ then I’ll come in an’ set a spell.”

“Don’t ye do it,” called Celia. “I dunno what made me speak. I’m ashamed to think I did.”

But she drew the wrapper toward her and began pulling out the bastings with renewed interest. When Ann Eliza sat beside the bed, working, she could almost feel they were dressmaking together, and to be bedridden seemed, for a moment, only an incident in an active world.

“Sarah Dwight’s postin’ up the path,” came the voice again. “She goes as if she was sent for. I guess suthin’s up.”

"Ask her right in here," called Celia. "I should admire to have her."

Ann Eliza, a tall, strong woman with a spacious face and sharp eyes, stood over her pressing-board in the sunlit kitchen. She was breathless with haste, and she compressed her mouth the tighter to keep a hold upon herself. However she hurried to get the meals put aside and a job finished in time, she was resolved that Celia should never know. It was bad enough, she thought, to lie in bed without suffering doubly from tumult without. The door opened hastily and Sarah Dwight flew in as if a wind had blown her. She was a little dark creature with a shawl over her head and eyes nervously roving. Sarah had always, all her sixty years, been looking for trouble, and it seldom failed her. As soon as she was inside the room, she began making pantomimic gestures toward Celia's bedroom door. Ann Eliza stopped pressing and regarded her with a wrinkled brow.

"What under the heavens do you want, Sarah?" she inquired. "What do you see in that corner?"

Sarah replied by flying noiselessly to the door and beginning to shut it, but as she put the latch softly to, Celia's voice came clearly:

"You step in here, Sarah. Ann Eliza's comin', an' we'll have a kind of a bee."

Sarah dropped the latch with a clatter, and turned on Ann Eliza a moved and half reproachful look. She swung the door open again.

"There," she said. "Seems's if everything I put my hand to this mornin's gone jest like that. Well, I've tried my best an' there's an end on't."

Ann Eliza had gathered up her sewing, and with her work-basket in the other hand and her spectacles pushed up on her forehead, preceded the guest into Celia's room.

"I guess you can squeeze in," she remarked cheerfully. "I'll take the cricket an' you can have the little rocker there by the sill."

Celia was used to receiving visitors in this fashion, and she only smiled and nodded when Sarah Dwight, the picture of anxiety, came in and sank into the chair assigned her. Celia was blond and pale, much younger than her sister, and with beautiful hair that shadowed her face gloriously and lay upon her shoulders in long braids. The neighbors used to say Celia Drake hadn't done anything for the last eight years but "lay abed and let her hair grow."

"Well," said she to the visitor, "what's the good word?"

Sarah Dwight stirred uneasily and darted a glance at Ann Eliza, as if it were her fault that things were not going as they might reasonably have been planned.

"There," said she, "I might as well speak right out. It's no use tryin' to hide anything if folks won't lift a finger to help ye. She'll be here in a minute."

"Who'll be here?" inquired Ann Eliza in a neighborly tone, yet as if her mind were elsewhere. She sewed with swift, short stitches, and she was really wondering whether the dress would be done that night as she had promised, and whether Mrs. Jacob Price would ever give her another piece of work if it were not. It had been pledged for the grange meeting, the last one of the spring.

"Mis' Jake Price," said Sarah Dwight, beginning to rock violently over the sill in a tumultuous way.

Ann Eliza cast a hunted glance from the window.

"My sakes!" she ejaculated. "She needn't think I can git this done to-night if she's comin' round here sayin' her say over every inch o' braid."

"'Tain't about that," said Sarah Dwight. "She went to the openin' o' the cottage hospital an' sence then she's possessed to git Celia carried up there."

She rocked angrily back and forth and looked from one to the other in a defiant questioning. But the sisters had no thought of her. Celia's hand dropped to the counterpane, with a thread half drawn.

"Me!" she whispered. "Why, I ain't got nothin' that kind the matter of me. I ain't broke no bones nor nothin'. I'm jest bedrid, that's all."

Ann Eliza's work lay on the floor at her feet. She had cast it there in entire repudiation of Mrs. Jacob Price. Her face was one blaze of scarlet.

"I'll let her know!" she cried. "What's she comin' into town for, bringin' in new ways an' stirrin' up strife? I don't care 'f she is the doctor's mother. I don't care 'f she's forty mothers. An' I'll tell her so to her face!"

Celia had begun to cry softly, and Sarah Dwight, appalled by the havoc she had wrought, tried to alleviate it by a palliation valueless even to herself:

"Well, they seem to got up suthin' about it's bein' better for her an' better for you. Near's I could find out, seem's if Celia needn't have give way in the be-ginnin'."

"Why," said Celia, in the tone of a hurt child, "I



was thrown out of the carryall. My back hurt me so I couldn't lift my hand to my head."

"I guess it did," corroborated Ann Eliza, in the same red fury. "I guess if Mis' Jake Price's back hurt her as I've seen Celia's hurt, she'd ha' took to her bed long ago, an' it'd ha' took more'n one cottage hospital to drag her out on't."

"Well, that's all I know," said Sarah Dwight. "They had a directors' meetin' yesterday in the vestry, an' I was there rubbin' up the communion cups. An' I couldn't help hearin' all 'twas said. Nobody opened their heads sca'cely but Mis' Jake Price, an' she talked as if butter wouldn't melt, but she meant every word."

"How many of 'em was there that wanted Celia carried out of her own home to a hospital?" glowered Ann Eliza.

Sarah Dwight answered eagerly:

"There wa'n't sca'cely a word said. Mis' Peters, she says, 'Celia's a delicate girl. Don't you think 'twould be dangerous to move her?' An' Mis' Marble, she says, 'I dunno how Ann 'Liza gits along sometimes. There ain't so much dressmakin' as there was, so many things come ready-made.'"

"Oh, my!" Celia was moaning into her pillow. "Mebbe I'd ought to go. Mebbe I had."

"The land! there she is now," breathed Sarah Dwight. "I ain't goin' to meet her. You lemme step out the back door."

Immediately she was gone and the chair rocked violently over the sill. Ann Eliza was rolling up Mrs. Price's skirt. She laid it on the bed in a neat bundle, and sped into the other room for the cambric and

canvas and spools awaiting her there in a confusion she understood. In a moment she was back again and had wrapped them, with the skirt, in an old number of the county *Star*.

"Oh, my!" breathed Celia. "What you goin' to do?"

"Don't you fret, lambie," returned Ann Eliza, in a tone deep with compassion. "I'm goin' to show her, that's what I'm goin' to do."

Mrs. Price was coming up the walk, and Ann Eliza, bearing her package, stepped out, closed the door, and waited for her. The breeze took wisps of Ann Eliza's hair and blew them into her eyes; their dishevelment accentuated her look of fury. Mrs. Price was walking swiftly on, with a pleasant smile, quick to return a greeting that seemed to be even more ready than usual. She was a tall, personable lady with gold-bowed glasses and smooth black hair, brought down over her ears. When she came to live in the town with her son, the young doctor, it was voted that she was "very genteel," though the timid shrank a little from her mastery. She noted the bundle in Ann Eliza's hand, and her face at once lighted with approval.

"Got it done already?" she said. "You're better than your word."

"Yes," said Ann Eliza. She spoke in a high, strained voice, and Mrs. Price interrogated her face in surprise. "It's done, all I shall ever do to't. Here 'tis."

She reached forward the bundle as if it were an offering connected with mystic rights, and Mrs. Price

mechanically took it. But her eyes were still on Ann Eliza's face.

"I'm afraid something has happened," she said, with compassionate interest. "Your sister isn't worse?"

"No," said Ann Eliza. She spoke with a concentrated bitterness. "Not unless it's worse to have her mornin' all upset hearin' how folks meddle in what don't concern 'em. If that's worse, then she is, an' no thanks to nobody but them that's done it."

Mrs. Price regarded her with a real concern.

"Well," said she, "I'm sorry. Don't you want I should come in and see if there isn't something I could do?"

The wisps of hair were blowing now about Ann Eliza's head like angry serpents.

"There's nothin' you can do except what ye have done," she retorted. "I guess that's enough."

"Well!" said the visitor. "Well!" Then as Ann Eliza turned and laid her hand upon the latch, Mrs. Price bethought her. "Here," she called. "Wait a minute. Here's a letter the little Hatch girl was bringing over — they'd just been to the mail — and I told her I'd take it."

Ann Eliza hesitated. It hardly seemed possible to receive even a letter from the hand of her persecutor. She came forward, her apron extended.

"You can drop it in there," she said briefly.

Then, as Mrs. Price wonderingly complied, she muttered a grudging "much obleeged," and went into the house. Once there her aspect changed. She took a hasty glance at the kitchen glass and smoothed her

hair. Then she called up a rigid but determined smile and went bustling into the bedroom. "There!" said she brightly. "That's over."

But Celia was in no state to respond. She lay back among her pillows, distraught, her blue eyes begging for news.

"What'd she say?" she breathed, between terror and a lingering apprehension that the danger might not be past.

Ann Eliza pulled down a window-shade a trifle and set the bureau cover straight.

"Oh," said she carelessly, "not much of anything."

"Didn't she say a word about the hospital?"

"Not one word."

Presently Celia had an idea.

"I wonder why she didn't," she mused. "Mebbe you didn't give her no chance."

"Oh," said Ann Eliza, with a fine carelessness, "I guess she had all the chance there was."

"You don't think Sarah Dwight got that up out o' whole cloth?" ventured Celia incredulously.

Then Ann Eliza's heart smote her, for Sarah Dwight was their trusted friend. But to save Celia a moment's apprehension, Sarah Dwight must go with the rest.

"Sarah's been kinder nervous for quite a spell," she said speciously, and then, to cover her thoughts, she burst out in a great disclosure. "What if we should have a minute puddin' for dinner?"

"An' sour cream sauce?" Celia's eyes were shining.

"An' nutmeg in it! I'll go straight out an' sift the flour."

Alone in the kitchen, Ann Eliza sank into a chair by

the window and gazed bleakly out at the April day. It was an excellent thing to have defeated Mrs. Price, but in the doing of it she had lost not only the pay for the unfinished dress, but a good customer. Sarah Dwight had reported truly; there was very little dress-making now, save for the few people who clung to old-fashioned ways. Sometimes when Ann Eliza thought about it in the night, it looked to her as if she and Celia might have to end their days at the poor farm. But even that would be better than a hospital.

There was the letter still lying on the table where she had tossed it in her haste. She regarded it with a frowning brow and then got a knife from the drawer and opened it. An unknown name was signed to it, but that was soon explained. The writer was a neighbor, he said, of Mr. Eliphalet Greene, who was paralyzed and had not long to live. Mr. Greene had given him the address of the two sisters who were, he said, his only relatives. Ann Eliza, letter in hand, hurried into the bedroom.

It was safe, she knew, to tell Celia anything that did not affect their personal well-being, and for the moment this seemed far away and vague.

"What do you think!" she announced. "Uncle 'Liphalet's had a shock."

Then she read the letter aloud. But Celia evidently did not regard it as a calamity next door. Her eyes filled with tears.

"Poor Uncle 'Liphalet!" she said softly. "An' he's mother's own brother."

Ann Eliza sat down, the letter in her hand, a look of abstraction on her face.

"Well," said she, "'tis pretty hard."

"Does it say he's poor?" Celia raised herself on one elbow, and Ann Eliza regarded her with concern. Celia, she felt, was never quite safe except when she was still, with the coverlet to her chin. "You know that time we took the stage over there," Celia went on. "Why, that was 'fore I had my accident. He was livin' all sole alone then, an' he never asked us to come in. But I know we thought 'twas well he didn't, for 'twould be as much as your life was wuth to eat a meal o' victuals there. I wonder what mother'd say."

They both mused for a moment and then Ann Eliza rose.

"Well," said she, "if I'm goin' to make a minute puddin', I'd better git about it."

After dinner, when the afternoon light brought its own tranquillity, they were working together over Celia's patchwork, Ann Eliza cutting out squares and laying them on the bed for Celia to arrange.

"You hadn't ought to be doin' this," said Celia suddenly. "Ain't you behind in your work?"

There was no work in the house, now that Mrs. Price's dress had been sent back, and Ann Eliza, with a sinking heart, had been wondering when something would come in.

"I'm pretty nigh caught up," she said carelessly. "Anyways I'm goin' to do this to-day. I feel just like it."

But Celia, with a quick motion, had swept the pile of squares away from her.

"Look here, Ann Eliza," said she, "I've put off sayin' it as long as I could. You've got to take the

cars to-morrer mornin' an' go an' see to Uncle 'Liphalet. He's mother's brother, an' I sha'n't sleep a wink thinkin' of him layin' there alone in that poor, miserable hole he's made for himself." Ann Eliza was gazing at her, pale with astonishment. "Sarah Dwight'll take care o' me," said Celia conclusively. "She'll shut up her house an' come over here an' be glad to. You've got to go."

Ann Eliza turned to her cutting and went on slashing out squares as if they were the hearts of her enemies. She worked with a perfect accuracy and dispatch, and for a long time there was silence in the room. At length Celia said, in a moved voice:

"Don't you remember how mother used to tell how good he was to her, an' how he carried the dinner pail, an' used to let her have his picce o' mince pie at noon?"

"Yes," said Ann Eliza. "I know it."

The next morning it seemed incredible to her that she should be on her way to the station, and that Celia should have bidden her good-by with a brave content. Sarah Dwight had been on the steps, rolling her hands nervously in her apron, and promising things over and over so fast that the words tripped on her tongue.

"I'll do anything't ever I can," was the conclusion she had called after Ann Eliza. "I'll do it jest as you would if you was here."

And now Ann Eliza was steaming away on her dutiful errand, and again, still in a dream, she found herself before the little black house behind its wilderness of bushes, and it all seemed but a day since she and Celia

had stood there together, gay in health and robustly shocked that any man could choose to live so. She looked about her at the thicket in the yard where green leaves were opening, and then up at the clear sky, to seek for courage. Then she entered, and found in the front room a little wizened old man lying in bed and staring at her with bright, seeking eyes. He wore a nightcap, and Ann Eliza's first thought was that, in haste as she was to return, it should not be until that cap was clean.

"How do you do, Uncle 'Liphalet," she said, in a clear tone, adapted to deaf ears. "I'm Ann Eliza."

But the sharp eyes gave no sign. Ann Eliza took off her things, and made a tour of inspection. In the kitchen she found flour and sugar and a little tea. As she was frowning over the empty cupboard, a man's voice came from the doorway, a soft voice of a kindly quality:

"Anything wanted to-day?"

Ann Eliza turned, and saw a giant in blue overalls with a shock of light hair and pleasant eyes.

"I live over t'other side o' the hill," he explained. "'Tain't more'n five minutes' walk. I've got a little money o' 'Liphalet's he left me when he was took down, to spend as I thought 'twas needed."

"Oh!" said Ann Eliza. She turned upon him, frowning with extreme attention. "'Twas you that wrote the letter."

"Yes. My name's Nathan Day. He wanted I should write."

"Did he think I'd come?" asked Ann Eliza.

"I dunno," said the giant. "Old 'Liphalet ain't a



man o' words. He ain't spoke much for twenty years or more. But he put thirty dollars into my hand an' said he guessed 'twould last him through. So if you want anything, you better say so."

"Thirty dollars!" ejaculated Ann Eliza. "My soul!" But she continued, in a lowered tone, "What's goin' to bury him?"

"I dunno," said Nathan calmly. "Mebbe the town would do that. Folks 'most allers manage to git buried, one way or another. Sha'n't I buy you some things over to the store?"

Ann Eliza enumerated a rapid list, carefully calculated to last Uncle 'Liphalet when she should be gone; for the thought of Celia was anxiously with her, and she made up her mind that a couple of days should see her on her way. But at the end of a week she was still there. The house, in its unspeakable chaos, had been cleaned, and Uncle 'Liphalet's night cap purified, so that now he looked like a tired old baby lying in a spotless bed and, it almost seemed, extremely amused about something.

"What's he laughin' at?" Ann Eliza asked Nathan Day abruptly, one morning after they had been remaking the old man's bed.

Nathan was standing on the step outside the kitchen door, his hat in his hand, not from courtesy but because, as he said, his brains did git so 'tarnal hot. Nathan looked off at the horizon.

"Oh, I dunno," he returned easily. "Old 'Liphalet allers had them ways."

"Well," said Ann Eliza, "I've got to be moggin' along home. I've got him into shape now, an' the

house's as clean as a ribbin. I dunno who'll take care of him arter I'm gone."

"No," said Nathan calmly, "I dunno who will."

Ann Eliza felt the exasperation of one set round by snares.

"Well," she said, with hostility, "how'd he git along 'fore I come?"

"Oh, I done what I could," said Nathan, "but 'twa'n't so to speak what you'd call care."

"I s'pose ye wouldn't do it ag'in," said Ann Eliza, frowning.

"Oh, yes," agreed Nathan, "I'd do it as long as he holds out."

But that day came a penciled note from Celia. She was getting along beautifully, she said. Ann Eliza must see Uncle 'Liphalet through. Ann Eliza, with a hunger in her heart which was half jealousy, half apprehension for her darling, put the letter in her pocket, like a charm, and resolved to stay over Sunday. But from week to week the time extended. There were more letters from Celia, and day by day Uncle 'Liphalet seemed to shrink and change. She could no more have left him than if he had been a baby rendered doubly helpless through the weakness of age added to that of infancy. One day Ann Eliza began to wonder if there would be money enough to last him through. It was the sixth week now, and she had seen that none of his needs were unfulfilled.

"How much you got left?" she asked Nathan, and he returned:

"Not quite a dollar, I guess, all told."

"Well," said Ann Eliza, "what we goin' to do now?"

Nathan smiled pleasantly.

"When old 'Liphalet give it to me," he returned, "he said he guessed 'twould see him through. If old 'Liphalet goes wrong on this trade, it'll be the fust one."

Uncle Eliphalet had calculated to a nicety, for that night he died. The next day Ann Eliza met Nathan with a moved face.

"Tell you what 'tis," she said. "I ain't goin' to have him buried by the town. You stan' by me so't I can git credit for a coffin, an' I'll work it out arterward if it takes me the rest o' my life. None o' mother's folks was ever on the town, an' they ain't goin' to begin now."

"Oh," said Nathan, "there's money to bury him. He left me enough for that."

"Why," said Ann Eliza, "you said the thirty dollars was all!"

"Yes," said Nathan; "he told me to."

In three days the house was cleaner than ever, in a stark way. Uncle 'Liphalet had gone out of it. The neighbors had come to the funeral and had stayed afterward, with offers of help, but Nathan and Ann Eliza were the only mourners. It was twilight now, and they sat together in the kitchen where the outlook was homely and kind.

"Well," said Ann Eliza, "it's over. Now to-morrer mornin' I'll take the first train for home."

Nathan had a little package in his hand.

"Here," said he, "I'll give you this now."

Ann Eliza opened it mechanically, and took out first a slip of paper and then a bank note. Her face grew ashen. She spoke with awe.

"Forever! if that ain't a hunderd-dollar bill!"

Nathan was leaning forward, his hands on his knees, regarding the parcel with a benevolent interest. He had on his best clothes, a shiny broadcloth, and he looked like a pleasant boy dressed up for "last day" at school.

"I should go through the whole business," he advised, with relish. "Mebbe there's a fifty-cent piece underneath or a Canady quarter."

Ann Eliza lifted the bill, and found another under it. There were six.

"My soul an' body!" she breathed. "Who do them belong to?"

"They belong to you," said Nathan, grinning. "When he had me write that letter, he give 'em over into my hand. I wouldn't take 'em less'n he'd sign a paper sayin' how many there was. There's the paper. Don't ye mislay it. An' if you come an' took care o' him, you was to have what was here."

"An' s'pose I hadn't?"

"Oh, then he was goin' to make his will an' leave it to somebody or nuther."

"I believe 'twas you. I believe my soul it was!"

Nathan straightened himself.

"Well, I guess whoever 'twas," he said bluffly, "they wouldn't ha' took it an' you a woman, an' all, an' a sick sister to home. I'm a clock-mender by trade, though I ain't done much lately. I kinder wanted to see old 'Liphalet through. But I guess mother'n' me've got enough so't we sha'n't come to want. You git your bunnit an' come an' spend the night. Mother's expectin' ye."

At his mother's door Ann Eliza stopped, moved by a sudden thought.

"How'd he know he'd have time to make a will an' leave it away from us?" she inquired. "How'd he know he wouldn't die that very night that ever was?"

Nathan smiled again, in his indulgent way.

"Oh," said he, "old 'Liphalet allers knew pretty well what he was goin' to do."

It was impossible to start for home the next morning, because there were so many things to talk over. Ann Eliza was determined that Nathan should share her legacy, and he was as firm in his refusal. So she had to take her leave unsatisfied, but resolving in her heart that his mother should have a set of silver spoons, "come Christmas," to supplement the worn ones that were evidently much prized. And visits were to be exchanged. The gay old lady acknowledged that she admired to "go abroad."

"You know," said Nathan, as he said good-by at the car, "that money ain't all. The place'll come to you, an' that'll bring in a matter of a few hunderds more. Good-by."

Ann Eliza, rushing toward her home, could scarcely think for the wonder of it all. She sat clutching her bag, wondering if everybody in the car could guess from her face how precious it was; but really her thought was all "Celia — Celia." And at twilight she was walking up the path between the peony beds to her own dear home, and her mouth was dry and her knees were weak with the marvel of it all. Some one was sitting on the steps. It was Sarah Dwight. She rose and hurried forward.

"I've been watching for ye," she began, in a trembling voice.

Ann Eliza reeled back.

"She's dead!" her dry lips uttered.

"No! no!" cried Sarah. "She — she's at the hospital."

Ann Eliza looked at her with tragic eyes.

"What have they done to her, so fur?" she cried.

"Oh, they ain't done nothin', Ann Eliza. They've been terrible good to her."

"How long's she be'n there?"

Sarah's head sank.

"'Most six weeks," she faltered. "Mis' Price she come here an' talked, an' the doctor he talked, and Celia she made up her mind 'twas best. You'd ought to see her now. She's as pleased as a child."

"I s'pose so," said Ann Eliza bitterly. "I s'pose her mind has gone with the rest. Well!"

She turned about, still holding her bag, and made her way down the path.

"O Ann Eliza!" cried Sarah Dwight, in a frenzy. "You ain't goin' to forsake your home like this!"

Ann Eliza turned. She spoke with bitterness:

"I left Celia in your keepin'. An' you let her go to her death an' never wrote me a word. Not a word!"

Sarah Dwight was wringing her hands.

"O Ann Eliza!" she cried. "She wouldn't let me. True as I stan' here this minute, Celia wouldn't let me."

But the gate shut with a click, and Ann Eliza was gone. Up the hill she sped to the old Judge Knowles house which was now the hospital. A nurse met her at the door.

“Oh,” said she, “you’re Miss Drake! You’ve come to see your sister. You wait here till I take round my trays, and I’ll show you her room. It’s after visiting hours, but Doctor Price said you were to be let in whenever you came.”

Ann Eliza made no reply. She watched the girl’s retreating back, and then sped softly up the stairs. She had heard some one humming softly—it was “Balerna,” the tune her mother had so often put them to sleep by, and it was Celia’s voice. She darted into the room, and there sat Celia, in a wrapper, on the side of her bed, braiding her hair. Ann Eliza flew at her and set the bag down at her feet.

“O lambie!” she cried, “what they done to you? Oh, you slip back into bed, or you’ll git your death!”

The color had come into Celia’s face. She looked young and glad.

“O Ann Eliza!” she breathed. “Seem’s if I should die, I’m so pleased.”

“What they done to you?” Ann Eliza kept repeating, trying to coax Celia’s slippered feet back under the sheet.

“They’ve been as good as gold,” cried Celia. “They’ve rubbed me an’ they’ve kinder worked on my mind. Ann Eliza, you see here.”

Slowly and with pride she put her feet to the floor, and stood triumphantly.

“Don’t you fall!” cried Ann Eliza, in an agony.

But Celia walked slowly to the window. She looked over her shoulder and laughed.

“There’s Doctor Price’s buggy,” she said. “Tickles him to death to find me on my feet.”

Ann Eliza flew to the window and looked out. She ran to the stairhead and listened. Doctor Price's voice, a low "brum-brum," was audible in another room. Ann Eliza sped back to her sister.

"Here," she whispered, "you come along o' me." She put her arms about Celia and lifted her as if she had been a child. "Slip your arms round my neck," she bade her. "Hug tight." And so, slowly, and softly as foot could fall she went down the staircase and out at the front door, and set Celia down by Doctor Price's buggy.

"There!" said she. "Climb in. On'y put your foot up. I'll lift ye, dear."

Celia, in a pleasant daze, did as she was told; in a second she found herself on the broad seat of the buggy.

"You wait a minute," said Ann Eliza, with a glance at the windows. "I'll fetch my bag. It's got suthin' in it I guess you never see afore."

She went noiselessly up the stairs and returned with the bag. When she had tucked it in under Celia's feet, she lifted the weight into the wagon, stepped in, and took the reins. Celia was pink with excitement. Her long braids were loosening and the curling yellow ends hung down her back.

"I didn't know you knew how to drive," she said, as the horse sped down the hill. This was the way to the stable.

"I dunno's I do," said Ann Eliza, clinging to the reins. "You hold on tight."

Sarah was at the gate, to meet them. She looked as if she had wept for hours and her handkerchief, a sodden ball, was clutched in one tense hand.



“You help her out,” called Ann Eliza gayly. “I’ve got to take the hoss back. There! you be careful o’ that bag. Don’t you leave hold on’t for your life!”

Then, after Celia and the bag had reached the ground, Ann Eliza turned the horse, and both women stayed to watch her. When the buggy careened upon one wheel, they shrieked; when it righted itself and went speeding off up the hill, there was thanksgiving in their hearts. Half-way up, Ann Eliza met Doctor Price, plunging down. She pulled in her steed.

“Here’s your hoss,” she called. “Wait a minute, an’ I’ll git out.”

But Doctor Price had climbed in over the wheel and taken the reins from her. He turned without a word and then he looked at her. Ann Eliza sat bolt upright, the red of victory in her cheeks.

“Ann Eliza!” said Doctor Price. He had never called her by her first name, but young though he was, she liked it. “Ann Eliza, you’re the gamest person in this township.”

Ann Eliza looked at him with a brief flicker of responsive mirth.

“I dunno’s it’s any wuss for me to take your hoss than ’twas for you to take my sister,” she said aggressively. “So!”

They were at the gate and the doctor drew up.

“Ann Eliza,” said he, “you look there.”

Celia, the sun on her yellow hair, was standing among the flower-beds. Somehow, in the hurry and excitement of the moment, Ann Eliza had hardly understood what it meant to see her moving. Now it was different.

She turned to the doctor, and her lips wildly sought for words.

"Yes," said he gently, "she's all right. Not very strong, but that's nothing. I'll come in to see her to-morrow. She'll do as well here now as she would at the hospital."

Then he drove away.

That night, after supper, when Sarah Dwight had gone home, and Ann Eliza had told her strange adventures, she looked at Celia lying on the lounge and resting before going to bed.

"Celia," said she timidly, "you'd jest as lieves be home, shouldn't you?"

Celia laughed. She seemed to laugh at everything to-night.

"I guess I should," she answered. "Why, Ann Eliza, I only went up there so's't I *could* come home!" There was a pause again and then she said timidly in her turn, "Mis' Price has been round to see me 'most every day. She said only yesterday she wondered if you'd be willin' to make her some muslin wrappers when you come back."

"I guess I could," said Ann Eliza. "Mebbe though, if she ain't finished it herself, I'd better see what I can do with that dress o' hers I had 'fore I went away."

## THE RETURN OF FATHER

**A**BBIE ANN, the married daughter from beyond Chicago, had kissed her mother, and now stood looking at her with pleasure and relief, as if she were not only glad to be at home but, from some hidden reason, reassured. The old lady, Mrs. Jacob Stimson, settled her cap with hands used to such clever touches, and gave one fleeting glance at the mirror, to make sure she was trig and tight. She was a slender old lady with soft cheeks and delicate features, and the fastidiousness and coquetry of youth lingered in the hemstitched ruffle of her apron and the rigor of her immaculate collar, with its cameo pin. She regarded Abbie Ann, a straight, fresh-colored woman markedly indebted to the accessibility of ready-made clothing, with a warm delight, the pink in her cheeks swiftly deepening.

“Well!” said she. “Well!” Then, with a sudden recognition, lost for a moment in pleasure, that the visit was a surprise, she added, “But what set you out to come?”

“I’ll tell you in a minute,” said Abbie Ann. She was looking about the kitchen where she had found her mother, with a deep satisfaction, a sense of return. Abbie Ann had made her home in the Middle West for many years, but she had not deviated by a line from the New England type, either in speech or in a certain

simple-hearted way of looking at things. "Where's father?"

Her mother started perceptibly, and recovered herself. She answered with some primness, and at once it occurred to Abbie Ann, with a throb of memory, that this had been her mother's tone when, as a child, Abbie Ann had asked too many questions and been told to "run away now and be a good little girl."

"Why," said Mrs. Stimson, "your father's round somewheres."

"Well," said Abbie Ann, with an amazed insistence, "I s'pose he is; but I want to see him. Where's father?"

Mrs. Stimson drew up a chair before the stove. It was a crisp day in the late fall, and she indicated the hearth invitingly.

"Don't you want to put your feet up there?" she asked. "I guess you're kinder chilled."

Abbie Ann shook her head. She was more nearly impatient with her mother than she could have thought it possible to be on a day of homecoming. A miserable certainty, thrust away from her through the journey, came pressing back upon her.

"There ain't anything happened to father?" she asserted, in alarmed interrogation. "Mother, you tell me."

Mrs. Stimson was getting out the molding-board, a preliminary to biscuits for supper.

"Mercy, no!" she answered. "Your father's well as common."

She went about her tasks, with a word of affectionate interest here and there, and Abbie Ann, having put

away her things and taken a reassuring look of her own at the glass, sat down and watched her.

"Well, mother," she said at last, following the old lady's deft achieving, "you're spry as a cat."

Mrs. Stimson gave a knowing turn of her wrist as she cut the dough.

"I don't know but I be," she allowed, with dignity. "I don't know why I shouldn't be. I ain't touched seventy-five yet, an' father's only seventy-eight. I don't know's there's any reason why we shouldn't be spry."

"You wear a different kind of cap," said Abbie Ann, regarding her. "That sort of changed you, first sight I had. You never used to wear such a big one, nor so far over your head."

"No," said Mrs. Stimson, still with dignity. "I don't know's I ever did."

"What made you change?" asked Abbie Ann, without thought, recrossing her feet on the hearth. "Your hair gettin' a mite thin? Mine's comin' out by handfuls. I tell Edmund I sha'n't have six spears to draw the comb through, if it keeps on as it's begun. 'Look at mother,' I says. 'She's got a great head o' hair. Father, too.' Mother, ain't it 'most time he's comin' in?"

Mrs. Stimson said nothing until she had set her biscuits to rise at the back of the stove and covered them with a cloth. Then she turned, the blood in her face, perhaps from her stooping or some unknown agitation, and, holding her floury hands together, stood straight, and addressed her daughter.

"Abbie Ann," she said, "father's up chamber."

Abbie Ann came to her feet.

"He *is* sick," she asserted. "There, I knew!"

"No, he ain't sick. He's as well as ever he was in his life."

"Then why don't he come down?"

"He don't feel to."

The two women stood facing each other, determination written all over the older face and pure trouble upon Abbie Ann's.

"Why," said she, stammering, "don't father want to see me?"

The old lady showed a brief impatience.

"Course he wants to see you," she answered. "You know father, Abbie Ann. You're all he's got, an' he sets by you as he does his life."

"Then," said Abbie Ann firmly, "what's he up chamber for?"

Her mother did not answer. She was moving about with a perfect precision, setting the table for supper.

"I guess we'll have it in here," she said. "Seems kinder cozy in the kitchen, come fall."

"But, mother," cried Abbie Ann, "you've only got on two plates. Ain't I goin' to stay?"

"'Course you're going to stay," returned her mother tenderly, but with a certain hardness, too. "What makes you say such a thing as that?"

New illumination shone on Abbie Ann and made her breathless.

"Ain't father comin' down?" she asked loudly.

"No, he ain't."

"Why ain't he?"

"He don't feel to."

Then the act Mrs. Stimson had evidently expected,

though she did not raise her eyes to see it or her voice to prevent it, came swiftly to pass. Abbie Ann stepped with great determination to the door opening on the kitchen stairs.

"I'm goin' up there," she announced. "If father can't come down, I can go up to him."

Mrs. Stimson went on setting the table, but after a moment she paused, a dish in hand, to listen.

"Father," she heard, "you in there?"

"Yes," came her husband's voice. "That you, Abbie Ann?"

"Why, I can't open the door!" rose the other voice, in wild interrogation. "Father, you locked in?"

"No, no," came the answering note, impatiently. "Course I ain't locked in. The key's on the inside."

"Then you've locked yourself in?"

There was a moment's pause, and the old lady, listening below, did smile a little in irrepressible satisfaction.

"O father," Abbie Ann was crying, "you just turn the key!"

"There! there!" came the reassuring voice, with a warmth and kindness adapted to a child. "Father's all right. You run down stairs an' have your supper an' be a good lady."

Abbie Ann, standing there in all her portly prosperity, conscious but an hour before of her correct ready-made suit wherein she meant to cut a dash before the neighbors, felt very little indeed and most forlorn. She felt perhaps as she had years ago when she was late at school and went along the lonely road without her babbling mates, disconsolate under the sunshine and with a dull ache in her heart because her record was

broken and she could not stand up to be commended on last day.

"Abbie Ann," called her mother from below, "don't you stan' there stirrin' father all up. You come down here an' see 'f you can't open this jar. I thought we'd have a mite o' quince, but the cover seems if 'twas on for good."

Abbie Ann came falteringly down. There were tears in her eyes, and her mother, seeing them, pushed the preserve-jar upon her with a friendly impatience, born though it was of sympathy alone.

"There! there!" she said. "We'll have our supper an' it'll be all right. You see if 'tain't."

But before they sat down, she buttered biscuits and set them on a tray, companioned by ample quantities of tea and quince. Abbie Ann was watching her.

"Here," she said, when it was ready, "you let me take it. I'll carry it up."

Her mother, tray in hand, seemed to wave her aside with the motion of her laden arms.

"You set down in your place," she said, with firmness, "an' don't you move out of it till I come back. Father don't want you should go up there, Abbie Ann, nor mother don't, either. You set down in your place."

Abbie Ann sat down, rested her elbows on the table, and listened while she wept. She followed her mother's steps up the stairs, heard the tray deposited briefly at the door, and then the click of the lock. There was a low colloquy above, the door closed again, and her mother was coming down. Abbie Ann made no effort to conceal her misery. She wept unaffectedly into her plate, but her mother pressed biscuits and quince upon



her with a cheerful warmth, and poured unstinted tea. Abbie Ann was not used to traveling, and she was tired from her journey, but it seemed to her that all this nervous misery of the moment had its fount in her unfathered state. Once she looked up with wet, reproachful eyes to ask:

“Has father got any fire up there, or is he settin’ in the cold?”

“Fire?” returned her mother scornfully. “Mercy, yes! He’s got the air-tight goin’ an’ crammed full o’ wood. When I was up there I ’most thought he’d set the mantelpiece afire. Smelled like an ironin’ sheet, all scorched up.”

Then supper was over and the dishes were washed, and they sat by the sitting-room hearth where the logs were blazing.

“Father got a lamp?” Abbie Ann inquired, from a settled misery.

“Course he’s got a lamp,” said her mother. “Here, you lay on this stick. It’s kinder gummy. I guess ’twill blaze complete.”

But Abbie Ann had something to say, and she put the stick on absently. It did blaze up, and with the light on both their faces she turned quickly to her mother, as if to use her courage before it ebbed.

“Mother,” she began, “you know why I come on here like this, without any preparation to speak of and without time to write I was comin’?”

“Why,” said Mrs. Stimson, in a frank return, “you come to spend Thanksgivin’.”

“Yes, so I did, but that wa’n’t all. We planned to come next year, Edmund and me together, but some-

thin's happened, mother, and give me a regular scare."

"Do tell!" said Mrs. Stimson.

She looked at Abbie Ann with unaffected trouble born of mother love. Abbie Ann warmed under it, and felt, with a rush of confidence, that mother would never in the world let her suffer anxiety without assuaging it.

"Well," she said, "Burt Loomis come out there, and run in to see us on his way along. I was tickled to death to get hold of somebody from here, and I wouldn't hardly let him get set down before I begun on him. How was you and how was father? You was all right, he said, smart as a trap. But when he come to father, he veered and tacked and wouldn't say nothin' till I just made him. 'Somethin's the matter with father,' I says, 'and you won't tell me.' Then he up and told."

"Lawzy-me!" muttered Mrs. Stimson, throwing on a handful of pine cones. "I warrant he did. Burt Loomis was born of a Sunday, if I recollect. Well for him. It give him a good full week to talk in."

Abbie Ann was embarked now upon the flood of her communication.

"He says to me, 'Abbie Ann, somethin's come over your father, and there can't nobody find out what 'tis. You know he was a terrible spruce-lookin' old gentleman,' says he, 'full beard and hair cut at the barber's. He and your mother made as handsome a couple as ever walked into the meetin'-house,' he says. 'But what's he done? He's let his hair grow all over his head, and he don't hold himself as he used to. He's all bowed down, and he don't look nobody in the face.'"

"Well," said Mrs. Stimson. She had fidgeted a little in her chair, but now she settled herself with a de-

terminated ease. "Well," she inquired, "what else d' he have to offer?"

Abbie Ann's voice dropped to a portentous note.

"Well, mother, he did say more, and that's what started me up to come. I says to Edmund, 'I'll surprise 'em and tell 'em I've come on to spend Thanks-givin'. And if I don't see anything to trouble me, that's all I'll tell; but go I must, for Burt Loomis worried me to death.'"

"I don't know's anybody need be worried at anything Burt Loomis has to fetch an' carry," returned the old lady defensively. "Besides, what's he said? Said your father's changed some, from year to year. Well, I guess most folks change. Come to that, look at Burt Loomis himself. There's his tintype in that album. I guess if he should look at it an' then stan' before the glass he'd see he'd changed some himself in the course o' forty year."

Abbie Ann passed a hand over her knotted forehead.

"That ain't all. He dropped his voice then, and he says, 'Abbie Ann, I guess if all was known 'twould be seen your father ain't the man he was. It's been months now since a neighbor's ketched him outdoor, and Al Brigham, that's workin' for 'em now, day's works, he says your mother gives all the orders and your father don't go out till after dark. And once Al met him in the road 'long about moonrise, and your father had a kind of a white thing tied round his head, and he wouldn't so much as speak, and Al didn't fairly know 'twas him.'"

"Well," said Mrs. Stimson calmly, "then what made him say 'twas him? What made Burt Loomis say so?"

"Oh, 'twas him fast enough," said Abbie Ann, in a gloomy certainty. "I felt in my bones 'twas him. And I up and packed my trunk that very day, and took the train just as I was except for my new suit."

Mrs. Stimson was rearranging the fire with extreme care.

"Well, now," she said easily, "I guess I wouldn't worry, Abbie Ann. Father's all right, dear, an' so you'll see. I guess if he hadn't been, mother 'd ha' told you. How's Edmund's business gettin' on?"

Abbie Ann roused herself to a corresponding readiness, and they talked gravely and again volubly through a long evening. But at ten o'clock when she rose to take the lamp her mother had significantly lighted for her, she paused a moment, to ask wistfully:

"Ain't father goin' to eat his Thanksgivin' dinner with us?"

Mrs. Stimson was covering the fire.

"Mercy, yes, I guess so!" she returned, with the same defensive briskness. "He will if he feels to."

Abbie Ann was lingering, looking absently into the flame of the lamp, as if it hypnotized her.

"It don't seem to me, mother," she offered, mournfully, to be again assured, "don't seem to me I could set down to Thanksgivin' dinner any way in the world and think father's up there by himself and nobody to say why nor wherefore."

Mrs. Stimson turned her by a decisive hand upon her shoulder.

"Thanksgivin' ain't till day after to-morrer, anyways," she remarked. "Now you clip it up to bed. Your fire's ready to blaze. Don't you hurry about

comin' down in the mornin'. We'll have breakfast good an' late, so's to get all 'cruited up."

But Abbie Ann, in her own room, left the door open a crack until she heard her mother ascend the stairs and halt at her father's threshold.

"That you?" came father's voice.

"Yes," said mother cheerfully.

"Alone?"

"Course I be."

The lock clicked, the door opened, and mother entered and was fastened in.

Abbie Ann wandered about her room, and looked with an absent-minded affection at the familiar furnishings:—her little chair by the window and her doll sitting in it like an effigy of remembered youth, the pin-cushion she had worked in blue and red, "magic mice" that were guaranteed by the directions to run if you looked at them fixedly, until the eyes were dazzled, and that never ran at all. Then she stopped before the glass and interrogated her own puckered face, as if to demand whether it could really be that she, Abbie Ann, was on from beyond Chicago to reassure herself about father, and that she was not reassured, and father and mother were in a state of siege in the next room. She shook her head at herself and, the unsolved problem sitting heavily upon her, betook herself to bed.

The next morning was a clear one, premonitory of winter in its frosty chill. Long before the first light, father and mother Stimson had stolen down into the kitchen and had their tea. Father loved his cup of coffee and mother knew it, but she had only to indicate

the sleeping Abbie Ann by an upward nod toward the other floor.

"She'd smell it," said mother.

Whereupon father took his tea thankfully and in haste. He was a slender old man with deep-set brooding eyes and a comedy of dress: for at that moment he wore over his head, tied snugly about the ears, one of mother's old-fashioned nightcaps. He had a curiously subdued air even with her, quite foreign to what must once have been his habit of behavior; and he was bent slightly, from some recently acquired habit, it would seem, rather than the involuntary stiffness of age. But to whatever necessity he had been subdued, mother treated him, even in this haste of preparation, with a tender deference lovely to receive, and he returned it in a manner quite his own. It was in some way a touching interchange of service between them, an intimate recognition of his having offered something she was thankful to accept. After their hurried breakfast, he went softly out, stopping at the door for a whispered word.

"I guess I'll have the carriage down the drive a piece, an' back the horse in there. Mebbe she won't be so likely to hear."

Mother nodded and tied on her bonnet, waiting in a chair. Father lingered for a moment more.

"What be I goin' to wear over my head?" he asked, in a tone of extreme distaste.

She looked at the nightcap and then at his Sunday hat, also in waiting.

"You don't s'pose —" she was beginning.

"No, mother," said he testily, "I don't. I won't have no bobbin' up with pins, nor I won't put my man's hat on over it. You've got to rig up suthin' else."

She stood for a moment, deliberating. Then she hurried softly into the bedroom and reappeared with an ancient cloud, made in sober gray.

"I've seen men folks wear 'em," she ventured. "Suthin' o' the kind, anyways. Mebbe a scarf. 'Twas when they had a toothache, or cold ears, or the matter o' that."

He nodded frowningly.

"Put out the light," he ordered. "Then you can bind it on."

Mrs. Stimson blew out the light, in perfect understanding of him, as if the deed were something not to be recognized by either of them, and in the morning dusk swathed her husband's head. She helped him into his overcoat, and he went out, her whispered caution in his ears, to steal through the shed and into the barn where brown Jennie was finishing her early feed of oats. Mrs. Stimson tucked two good hardwood sticks into the fire, took a keen look about the kitchen, and stole out after him, closing the door carefully behind her. She waited a moment to draw on her woolen gloves and listen for Abbie Ann's step in the chamber above, or perhaps her challenging voice. But the seclusion within was as still as the world outside, and she walked away down the path to the old butter-nut-tree where her husband in the chaise awaited her. He helped her in and also mounted, and they went slowly down the drive. Once out in the frozen road,

he tightened the reins and put a hand on the whip for the warning shake brown Jennie knew. As they started up, he chuckled.

"Good joke, mother," said he, "good joke! 'Most like runnin' away."

The old lady looked round at him, startled, and her eyes filled with tears. This was the first time for months that father, out of his unnatural depression, had laughed at all. But she did not answer from the inner fullness of her heart, save with the practical reminder:

"Don't you forget we've got to stop at Al's. I dunno what Abbie Ann 'd say if she should wake up an' find herself all soul alone in the house. She was worked up enough as 'twas."

Before the little cottage at the rise of the hill they drew up, and mother got out as if it were quite understood that she was to do the errand, and tripped up to the door. She had to knock several times, and at last Al's wife put her head out of the window, a bed-quilt held about her, and inquired who was sick.

"You s'pose you could go over to the house an' keep up the fire an' git breakfast?" Mrs. Stimson asked. "Abbie Ann's come home, an' father an' me we're called away to do some business — quite an important arrant. We left Abbie Ann abed, an' when she wakes up if you'd tell her how 'tis, an' say we'll be home by ten at the latest —"

Mrs. Brigham was putting down the window. In spite of the quilt, she found it chill.

"Yes," said she. "I'll go down along soon's I'm dressed."



Then Mrs. Stimson hurried back to the carriage, and father drove on. He was full of reminiscence. Something, some flavor of their stealing away together or an anticipated relief all his own, made it seem to him as if they were young and escaping from the world. He recalled days of their courtship, and she kept even with him, step by step, until they came to their wedding, and he told her again she was the handsomest girl that ever walked bride in the county and that it was so remembered to that day.

"Well, I've seen some changes," she said, with a wistful sadness through her calm.

"So's the world," said father, pointing with his whip. "'Twa'n't so many months ago 'twas green an' full o' buds, an' now 'tis brown. But 'twon't be long before the snow 'll be here to cover it, an' then there won't be a fence post but what's handsomer 'n any bloom. Don't you worry, now. There's different kinds of handsome, an' one's as good as another, only take 'em right. Spring ain't everything, nor bein' young ain't everything, good's it is."

When he fell into this strain of talking mother Stimson loved beyond everything — her own speech or the business of the hour — to hear him. The minutes seemed to fly like thread from a reel. She forgot her haste, and almost that Abbie Ann was awaiting them. It was spring again, and he and she were young.

They were driving toward the sunrise, and it was long after the full dazzle had struck them in the eyes and then warmed them happily, that they drew up at the little tavern on the edge of Overbridge, the great town full of cloth-mills. Few, even of the hands, were stir-

ring, and mother Stimson got out of the carriage and hurried up the steps as if she had planned her way and knew how to make it swift. Father, too, had thought often of this coming. He left the reins slack, and leaned back in the carriage, his head in the corner, as if he had no part in the business of the call and longed only to escape the public eye.

Within, mother Stimson had met a sleepy boy.

"Is the French hair lady here?" she asked.

She was trembling now. The goal of a long and eager journey was before her, and she dared not think she saw it.

"Yes," the boy told her. The hair lady was still staying there, going about by day, to get orders, but she mightn't be up yet. It was pretty early.

"You go an' wake her," said mother Stimson. "You knock on her door, an' tell her to slip somethin' on an' let me come up there. Tell her it's a customer that can't wait."

The boy went loping away, and mother Stimson stood and trembled. Presently he was back again, and said she might go up. The French lady was dressed early that morning, because she was going to take a train. But she'd be back again after Thanksgiving. She was leaving her trunk. She was going after switches, the boy opined. But Mrs. Stimson hardly heard, and a moment afterward she stood in the Frenchwoman's little sitting-room that was also her consulting office on certain days of the week, where a glass case containing luxuriant headgear invited and repelled the eye, and she herself, elegant and grave, was confronting her visitor with a professional urbanity. Mother

Stimson kept on trembling. In a moment she found she was untying her bonnet strings, and that the French lady, with sympathizing comments in a foreign tongue, was helping her, and that she had not spoken. Now the French lady ran a practiced hand over the denuded poll, without touching it, but in some mysterious way seeming to garnish it with invisible hair.

"A front?" she said, with a rolling of the r's, throwing into the English word a weight of dignity. "A little waved, not too thick — graceful — yes?"

Mother Stimson's hands were shaking under her cloak. She whispered her confession.

"It's been gone for a long spell. I've felt it a good deal. My husband felt it because I did. I wanted me a front, but he wa'n't willin'. He said 'twas terrible, false hair so; might be cut off o' the dead, for all we knew, or some awful creatur'. So he said — I'll get father to come up."

She was out of the room and down the stairs. At the door she held up a beckoning finger, and father, awaiting it, got out and followed her in with the same silent haste. Together they stood before the Frenchwoman, and mother Stimson was unwinding the cloud from her husband's head, and he was pulling at it savagely, and presently he stood there, reddened with a kind of shame, and over his shoulders, incredibly long, hung white hair, luxuriantly curling. The Frenchwoman could speak very little English outside the vocabulary of her trade, but she did understand it to some degree, and more than that, she interpreted the human heart. She stood looking at them for a moment, her eyes widening with a fervid pleasure. Then

she exclaimed, partly in her own language and a little in theirs, and when she cried, "Beautiful! beautiful!" it was not apparent whether she meant the river of soft hair or the devotion that had bent the old man's life to the achieving of it.

But after that first moment she moved quickly. She had him in a chair and leaned over him, scissors ready, and mother stood watching, her hands clasped and expectation in her eye. And as the locks were severed with that "snip" that means freedom to a child and might spell deliverance to a man, father Stimson lifted his head at every click; and whereas, when she began, he had been abased and humble, at the end he held himself firmly and looked mother in the eye as if only he and she knew what liberation meant to him. The Frenchwoman had put the tresses on the table, delicately, in a soft, ordered pile, and now she laid her hand over them, caressing them as if they were priceless of their kind.

"In a week you shall come," she said, "and we will fit it. You shall complain of it. I will change, if need must. As for you, monsieur, I kiss your hand."

She did it, deftly, prettily, as she had cut the hair, and with a sweeping curtsy, and father Stimson, mother following, had started down the stairs.

It was after ten when they drove up to their own door, where Abbie Ann, distraught, stood waiting for them. Father called to her before she well could hear him, and kept on calling.

"That you, Abbie Ann?" he cried. "That you?"

When the carriage stopped, Abbie Ann was at the wheel, both hands grasping at him.

“O father,” she cried, “don’t you look well! You’re as handsome as a picture, too. There’s nothin’ the matter, is there, father?”

“Matter o’ me?” said father Stimson. He leaped out buoyantly. “I guess there ain’t. I’m too young for my years, that’s all’s the matter o’ me. You come here, Abbie Ann, an’ let father give you a real old-fashioned hug.”

A little later mother Stimson and Abbie were sitting by the fire while mother toasted her chilled feet.

“Father ’n’ I thought we’d ride over to town,” she was saying. There was a suppressed excitement in her air, and it broke forth occasionally in an eye gleam or a triumphant tone. “We had some business that had to be done. ’Fore you go home I’ll tell you all about it, but ’tain’t necessary now. I’ve got the turkey stuffin’ to think of, an’ father’s goin’ to pick over the squashes a little an’ see if he can’t smell out a mealy one.”

Father had come into the kitchen. He was a tall man, and, from the way he bore himself, not yet an old one. In his hand he carried an old-fashioned cloud.

“Well, Abbie Ann,” said he, “I guess there’ll have to be a proclamation for me over ’n’ above the Governor’s. I don’t recall as I ever looked for’ard to Thanksgivin’ day with better feelin’s. Here you be home with us, an’ mother an’ me — Here, mother!” He tossed her the cloud. “Here’s suthin’ you left in the buggy. Ain’t it a kind of a thing to wear over your head?”

## THE DESERTERS

“**W**ELL, Ida,” said Sarah Frances, the oldest of the three sisters, “it’s your turn to stan’ guard to-night.”

They had eaten supper in the kitchen because it seemed foolish, now that Uncle James had died, to trouble about spreading the dining-room table for women folks alone or to set forth more than a cup of tea and some biscuits and preserve. Uncle James had been a tyrant. Years ago he had summoned the three Hall sisters to live with him, and ever since he had so roared and bullied and called for dishes rich and strange, that now he was, as Lucy Ann, the middle sister, whispered it, “taken away,” they felt as if some invincible force had suddenly failed them, and that they were, if not in grief, as they tried becomingly to think, much weakened in all their defenses. Ida was the youngest, blond and sweet, with an oval face that came into a point at the chin, and a quantity of fine flying blond hair. Lucy Ann used to look at the hair with a puzzled awe, and reflect that only a few years ago her hair was almost as pretty, though without this curling wildness, and now she seemed to have only a wide parting and some smooth light silk to fringe it. Ida’s skin, too, was the texture and hue of a pink rose, and Lucy’s had faded into a delicate softness veined with tiny wrinkles. It seemed to her that she was al-

ways seeing her own youth in Ida: her losses, too, because she had given up her lover, years ago, when it seemed likely that Sarah Frances would go into consumption, just as Ida had given up Nathan Caldwell for Sarah Frances and Uncle James combined. Only that had not been because anybody had consumption. It was because Nate was only 'prentice then to the stonemason at Templeton, and because Deacon Enfield, newly widowed, had been asking Ida interested questions about her love of cookery and whether she could milk. Sarah Frances and Lucy Ann were step-sisters to Ida, and much older, but they were not in the least alike. Lucy Ann at this moment, pondering over Nate's dismissal, glanced obliquely at Sarah Frances, wondering, as she often did, how it was possible for some people to get their way by a mere "say so." She dared not look her sister fully in the face with such a query still seething, because Sarah Frances would plump out, "What do you want?" and Lucy Ann would have to answer. And Sarah Frances sat up straight and tall — everybody said she "set high" in church, and that seemed to give her an added power — and fixed Ida from under her heavy black brows, repeating, because no one had answered:

"Ida, you hear? You'll have to stan' guard to-night."

Ida looked as if she were going to cry. She rose from the table, walked to the window where the May sun was setting gloriously, and then turned about to her sisters. She fingered her apron like a child, and began half pettishly, because she was afraid of Sarah Frances and it was difficult to speak at all:

"I think it's perfectly ridiculous for us to sit up all night, just because Uncle James has passed away."

Sarah Frances had a dry brown skin lined by wrinkles deeper than her age deserved. Some ran down from the corners of her mouth and others marked off the forehead into parallel spaces. There were none of the sun's rays at the corners of the eyes, those that are made by smiling. She looked at Ida now, and all the lines deepened. The brow took on an interrogative cast, and the mouth drooped severely. Lucy Ann, even without looking, was aware of this intensifying of all the signs of trouble, and fidgeted in her seat.

"Do you call it safe for three women folks to live here in this lonesome house half a mile from a neighbor, an' poke upstairs to bed as if for all the world they didn't care what's prowlin' round below?" asked Sarah Frances.

Ida gave a little involuntary start and a hitch of her shoulders when the possibility of prowlers came forth so resolutely voiced. She was not brave. She and Lucy partook of the same general fears; but Sarah Frances, who had had a shock in her youth when a tramp was found asleep and snoring on the best bed, at twelve o'clock at night, owned a set of formulated terrors. The others were afraid because they were afraid. She anticipated tramps whose snoring waked you when you were most secure. But Ida, timid by nature and inoculated with keen apprehension of Sarah Frances, was weakly essaying the defense of a position she knew to be untenable.

"I should rather be abed an' asleep, with the sheet over my head, an' let 'em prowl."



"I s'pose," said Sarah Frances, with acidity, "you mean to tell me you ain't afraid."

"No," said Ida, "I am afraid. Seems if we'd got into a habit of bein' afraid. Why, Bertha Caldwell," (this was Nate's sister, and she faltered upon the name) "she stays alone there every single night of her life, an' if you ask her how she can, she just laughs."

"I should be as nervous as a witch," murmured Lucy Ann.

She felt it to be the part of expediency to throw some weight of argument on the side of Sarah Frances. But the eldest sister was ignoring the main issue. She had fixed on Ida her demanding gaze.

"You seen Bertha lately?" she inquired.

Ida flushed a deep beautiful pink all over her face. Lucy Ann, fascinated by the way the soft flood rushed even into her ears, put up her hand and touched the lobe of her own ear, and sighed. Somehow it made her remember how she had once wanted earrings with blue stones in them, like those a strange lady, boarding in Tiverton for the summer, had worn to church with a dress the color of the sky. It rushed upon her, as swiftly as the blood had hurried into Ida's face, that when youth wants a thing it should have it, because the day comes when desires fail.

"Too bad!" she murmured, off her guard.

"What'd you say?" asked Sarah Frances, and she returned with a guilty haste:

"Nothin', sister. I was kinder talkin' to myself, that's all."

"You seen Bertha?" Sarah Frances repeated, without mercy.

"Yes," said Ida, in her fitful defiance that was yet all softness, like the bravado of a gentle child. "I saw her Wednesday."

"Where?"

"Down to the post-office."

"Talk to her?"

"Yes, quite a spell."

"Ask her any questions?"

"No, Sarah Frances, I didn't."

The fretted voice thrilled with exasperation.

"Well," said Sarah Frances, "you may be glad an' thankful. If there's anything that's bold an' for'ard it's when a girl is dyin' over a fellow an' goes 'round askin' questions about him. I'm glad you didn't."

Lucy Ann, the gentlest of critics, with no suspicion in her, went a pace further in her mind, and trembled lest Sarah Frances also should take that leap. Ida might not have asked questions about Nate, she thought, but it would be a marvel if Bertha had not vouchsafed news of him.

"Well," Sarah Frances continued, rising, "we might as well clear away. Lucy, you set the dishes into the sink, an' Ida, you can wash 'em up. I'm goin' to bring uncle's big chair out o' the best room, so's you can be nice an' comfortable whilst you watch."

"I don't want the big chair," trembled Ida. "It'll be just as if he was settin' there. I sha'n't get him out of my mind."

"What if you do think of his settin' there?" demanded Sarah Frances, with severity. "Don't you want to be reminded o' your poor uncle? Why, you'd ought to be a happy girl if he could come back an' set

with us, your own uncle, good an' kind as he was, an' leavin' you three shares o' stock. My stars!"

Ida tossed her head a little, but she said nothing. She had only spirit enough to seem to be about to defy Sarah Frances, not really to do it.

"Well," she said, as she washed the cups swiftly with deft turns of her pretty wrists, "I'll set up an' watch, if you say so, but I don't want anybody's chair. An' if you fetch it in, I'm goin' upstairs, Sarah Frances, that's all."

Sarah Frances exclaimed briefly, and then gave the matter up. She had been the one to watch the night before, and the vigil, coming on the strain of Uncle James's illness, had told upon her; she thought longingly of her room above and the feather bed, in its beguiling plumpness. It was scarcely eight o'clock when she went about and fastened all the doors and tried the windows.

"Come, Lucy Ann," she called. "Le's you an' me be off. We can't do any good settin' here. Ida, if you hear anything you can't account for, you come to the chamber stairs an' blow the horn. I wouldn't make me any tea, if I's you, if I could help it; but 'long about midnight, if you feel like droppin' off, you better have a cup. I'll leave a plate o' snaps out here on the table. Long about four you could keel up on the lounge an' go to sleep. I don't know's I ever heard of anything happenin' betwixt three an' four. Come, Lucy Ann."

Lucy Ann, submissively following, cast back a compassionate glance at Ida, standing there, rebellious but acquiescent. It seemed a shame to Lucy Ann that a

girl dowered with the full treasury of youth should be delegated to waste her hours in guarding the slumbers of two old women; but she was alive to the fact that it actually was Ida's turn, and that Sarah Frances, the commanding officer had spoken. So she nodded a meager farewell, shutting the door of the enclosed stairway behind her, and Ida was left alone in the kitchen with only the clock for company.

For an hour, perhaps, it was very pleasant to sit there with the light turned low and think her own thoughts, safe from the peril of that probing voice. She almost heard it now.

"Ida, what you thinkin' about? Why, your cheeks are as red as a beet."

She was always thinking of Nate, sometimes in one mood and sometimes in another, and always with crimson cheeks, because she knew Sarah Frances could scarcely imagine her capable of anything so shameless as this barefaced longing to see her lover and hear his voice. Sometimes it was pure longing and a wild impatience against herself for having given him up, and sudden anger at him for taking his dismissal. Tonight she had a drowsy sense of peace, as if she had just seen him, or he were near and their parting had been only the matter of a dream. She dozed off a little and came broad awake, starting and wondering where she was, because, though so sleepy, she was not in bed. And then she remembered why she was there; they were three women alone in the house, and Sarah Frances had decreed that one of them should watch until the early morning, and if marauders came, blow the horn and rouse the others. She looked about her at the still

kitchen, where the friendly clock beat pleasantly, and it all seemed incredible to her and so fantastic that she put her hands upon the chair arms to rise and go, though foolishly late, to bed. But then a small sound that was not the ticking of the clock quickened her breath and sent the blood to her heart. It was the tiniest tapping on the window pane. Then a voice slowly and persistently began repeating her name.

“Ida!” it said, with a regularity like the clock’s beat. “Ida! Ida!”

The curtain was up perhaps six inches at the bottom, but she dared not pull it down. She could only sit as still as a rabbit caught in a wood, and hear her heart go hurrying on. And then there was a whistle outside the window, a very little one, with only a pane of glass between it and her. It repeated three notes over and over, the song of the white-throated sparrow she and Nate had heard that twilight down in the old pasture when she had told him they could not go together any more, and Nate had said, with a sudden pause in his anger and remonstrance, “Hear that good-for-nothin’ bird! Now we sha’n’t either of us ever forget him as long as we live.” She had not forgotten the lonesome thrill. In the midst of her growing terror it recalled the summer day and Nate and the misery of parting. And suddenly she knew. She rose and went to the door and opened it. And just as she might have guessed it would happen some time, he was there, taller and broader than she had remembered him, with the same eager light in his dark eyes and the old merry, loving smile. Then she bethought herself.

“You mustn’t come in!” she whispered.

But while she was saying it, he had entered and now he caught her to him and kissed her.

"You mustn't," she kept saying, and tried to draw herself away, knowing he would not let her. "They'll hear you. Sarah Frances' room is right overhead."

Nate laughed and let her go. But he looked at her, and Ida put up her hands to smooth her hair, knowing Sarah Frances would call it a crow's nest, but blushing to think he had other names for it.

"You wouldn't wake Sarah Frances if you blowed her up with dynamite," he said. "She watched last night."

"How'd you know?"

"Bertha told me."

"How'd she know?"

"You told her 'twas turn about."

"I guess I did," said Ida contritely. "I'd ought to been ashamed, but it made me mad, this settin' up so, an' it did seem so nice to see Bertha again."

Nate sat down and stretched out his legs.

"Well," said he, "let's talk it over."

"Talk what over?" she asked.

She was a different Ida from the one Sarah Frances saw every day, meekly doing tasks and only now and then flashing out in a brief rebellion. Her eyes had merry lights in them and she curved her mouth in a pretty fashion that seemed to know itself to be desirable. Now she closed the door and stole to the stairs to listen, and finding it still above, returned to a chair near the table, and sat down, her hands folded and her demure lids dropped as if it was necessary to cover that light in the eyes.

If Nate thought of love making, he did not show it. Instead he spoke whimsically, but with vast feeling.

"I'm awful hungry."

Ida came to her feet and ceased to play at coquetry.

"Why," said she, "ain't you had your supper?"

"No. I come straight on after I got Bertha's letter. I only had time to change my clo'es."

"Ain't you been home?"

"No."

"Nor seen Bertha?"

"Course I ain't. I come here to see you."

At that she blushed a little deeper, but deftly and with swift despatch set him out food from the pantry. There was half a custard pie intended for to-morrow's dinner and that she meant to leave untouched because it would be more difficult to account for than vagrant trifles like doughnuts and small cakes. But when she saw how deliciously the whey of the custard was weeping into the plate, and remembered Nate liked exactly this kind of sweet delectable, she could not resist it. So the pie, too, found its way to the victualed area before him, and Nate began to sweep the board. As he ate, he told her things: how he had done well with his apprenticeship, and was taking a contract for himself now to build the new face wall in front of the jail at Smedley, and if there was ever a time when he could afford to have a home of his own and settle down, it was now. Then he concluded:

"Got any cheese?"

Ida went away to the pantry to see; but when she had come back and stood by him, making the cutting of it an excuse to look down at the thick waves of his

red-brown hair, she heard a small sound at the stairway door. The knife trembled for an instant in her fingers, but she cut bravely until Nate bade her stop, reminding her that there was a limit to the eating of cheese. He did not know, Ida thought, with an added sickening of the heart, what they should see if they turned that way. When it was possible, she did turn slowly and faced the figure there. It was not Sarah Frances. It was Lucy Ann. In her shock of terror and relief Ida wondered what her sister would do: whether she would scream and call Sarah Frances or command Nate to take himself away. After all, she did not know Lucy Ann very well, though she had moments of feeling they understood each other. These were the times when, in unusual stress, they had whispered consultations about Sarah Frances — always known, by an unspoken consent, as “she” — chiefly wonderings as to what she would be likely to do. But as Ida herself seemed that night to wear some brighter web over her every-day self, like a shadowy veil set with brilliants, so Lucy Ann, too, was changed. She was clad in a costume sacred to the chamber and known as a short gown and petticoat, and above that garnishing rose her face alight with wild excitement. Her thin light hair had been hastily coiled, but locks of it strayed unheeded. She looked like a woman who had escaped not only the bonds of sleep but every known convention, and had waked to some incredible adventure. Ida, looking at her imploringly, felt her mouth quiver in the unspoken prayer that her sister would at least mercifully listen before condemning her. But Lucy Ann closed the stairway noiselessly be-



hind her and advanced upon them, and Nate, pushing aside the empty pie plate, looked up and saw her, and sat with eyes distended and a slow smile coming. She spoke in a cautious yet a piercing whisper.

"Ain't you made him a cup o' coffee?"

At that and the vanishing of her fear, Ida bent over the table in noiseless but unstinted mirth and Nate grinned broadly. He got up and offered Lucy Ann his chair.

"No," she said, "I can't stop to set. Ida, I should think you might ha' made him a cup o' coffee."

"No," said Nate, out of his general fund of good nature and his discovery that Lucy Ann, though she looked as wild as a hawk, inexplicably seemed to mean him well, "I had a cold bite. That's all I wanted."

"I guess you better not jine in if you can help it," said Lucy Ann rapidly. "Leastways unless you whisper. Your voice is terrible deep. I heard it as plain as day when I waked up. I thought 'twas the moon that roused me, strikin' acrost my face, but when I'd got my senses back, it come over me 'twas you."

Nate pulled out his watch. He had much to say to Ida, and he hoped Lucy Ann would take herself upstairs again. But Lucy Ann was speaking sharply.

"Well, hadn't you better be gittin' off?"

He looked at her and saw with amazement how bright and dark her eyes were, the pupils distended until there seemed to be no white at all. Lucy Ann gave him no interval to answer. Now she spoke impatiently.

"Ain't you two goin' to run off together?"

Nate regarded her for a moment with a growing wonder. Then he slapped his leg.

"By George!" he said. "Now you mention it, I guess we be."

"O Lucy Ann!" Ida threw at her reproachfully. "How can you?"

But Lucy Ann seemed to be speaking out of the best of faith. She looked from one to the other, frowning slightly.

"Why," she said, "if he ain't come here for that, in the dead o' the night so, an' she likely to post down here any minute, what has he come for?"

Nate had been considering gravely. His eyes were on the floor, and he held his hand over his chin in the way, Lucy Ann saw, his grandfather used to do when he was cogitating over affairs. And his grandfather, it was well known, had a will like iron. Nate's thoughts were for himself, but when he looked up he was not quite the same. A softness had come into his eyes unlike their brilliant joy when he had announced himself, and his mouth was firm, yet somehow sweet.

"I guess you've got the rights of it, Lucy Ann," he said gravely. "I guess that was what I did come for. I thought 'twas only to see Ida an' plan how she could slip away some day next week an' meet me an' we'd be married. But I guess you're right."

Ida's cheeks were scarlet now, and the hot tears burned them.

"O Lucy Ann, how could you!" she said passionately. "I should think you'd be ashamed — an' you a woman, an' my own sister, too!"

Then a change came over Lucy Ann. Her cheeks, too, had reddened, and she looked a passion warm

enough to scorch up all the girlish shyness ready to dissolve itself in Ida into the dew of tears.

“Look here,” she said, “when you was nothin’ but a little girl somebody stood here in this very kitchen, same time o’ year an’ all, an’ moonlight, too, an’ be-seeched me to run away with him. I was a poor, weak, miserable creatur’, seems to me now, that couldn’t say my soul’s my own if anybody told me they’d bought it an’ paid for it — same’s folks did tell me — folks that’s up chamber now, an’ if you listen hard enough you’ll hear her breathin’.”

Ida nodded and Nate said involuntarily, but as if it were for his own enlightenment:

“Sarah Frances!”

“Sarah Frances,” repeated Lucy Ann, in a confiding whisper. But her voice asserted itself again, and she spoke out clearly. “I guess that night I was nearer to bein’ what I’d ought to been than ever I’ve been before or sence. ‘Yes,’ says I, when he’d asked me over an’ over mebbe a dozen times. ‘Yes, I’ll go.’ An’ there stood Sarah Frances at the foot o’ the stairs, them very stairs — I can see her now —”

Nate and Ida, in swift accord, reached out a hand, one to the other, as they turned quickly to the stairs. But Lucy Ann stood with her back to the danger spot. She seemed to have passed beyond the need of caution.

“An’ says she to me, right up high, in a kind of a scream that went through ye like a knife, ‘Lucy Ann, come ketch me! I’m bleedin’ at the lungs.’ An’ I run to ketch her, but not before I’d said to him, ‘No, I can’t. I’ve got to take care o’ Sarah Frances.’ An’

he swore an' dropped his arm off'n my waist an' was off like a shot. An' I never 've seen him from that day to this."

Involuntarily Nate put his arm about Ida and drew her nearer, and Lucy Ann nodded, and said:

"That's right."

Ida had always heard that Sarah Frances was threatened with consumption in her youth, but she thought of it only as a tragic shadow miraculously swept away.

"But was she bleedin' at the lungs?" she asked unbelievably.

Lucy Ann shook her head, in an access of scorn.

"Course she wa'n't. You know that as well as I do. She's as like Uncle James that's passed away as if they were cut out o' the same piece. Shake 'em up in a bag an' you couldn't tell the difference. But Uncle James was a real good man," added Lucy Ann, with a late contrition, "an' I do mourn him much as ever I can, an' Sarah Frances has been a good sister to both of us. How many clo'es you goin' to take?" This last she launched accurately at Ida, who recoiled a little, as if it had struck her, and said, "Oh!" again in a tone of shame.

Nate was answering with pride:

"She won't need anything. I can buy her all she wants, an' more, too."

"Well, you better have your best hat an' jacket," said Lucy Ann, after an instant's calculation. "Look here! You go out an' set down on the bench down by the leelocks, an' I'll poke up stairs an' pack you up a few things. I'll fasten the door after ye, an' then if she

should come down I'll tell her you've gone off to bed an' I stood guard myself."

"O Lucy Ann," Ida was faltering, "I don't want you to tell such things for me."

"Be careful when you strike the gravel," said Lucy Ann. She was holding the door beguilingly open. "I guess you better not set foot off the grass. An' don't you yip, either o' you, till you're way down by the leelocks."

They heard her locking the door behind them, and afterward, while they were stealing across the grass, a terrifying voice rose from above:

"Lucy Ann, that you? What you up for?"

Then Ida was sure she did want irresistibly to run away, and clung to her lover's arm and led him faster to the lilac covert, and while they went they heard Lucy Ann's voice, quite unlike itself, louder, triumphant, as masterful as the one it answered: "I'm lookin' at the moon. It's terrible bright to-night."

But the other voice adjured her not to get cold, and to slip right back into bed and pull the quilt up; and Ida, her head on her lover's shoulder and her hand in his wondered if it could be that from this time nobody but Nate was to tell her to do things, and was quite sure that all the things he required of her would be pleasant ones. It seemed a very brief space until the figure in the short gown and petticoat came flitting to them across the grass. Lucy Ann carried a large valise, and Nate sprang to take it from her.

"It's a terrible old-fashioned kind of a contrivance," she said, as she relinquished it, "but it's the biggest, an' I found quite a number o' things I thought you'd

want. Here's your hat. You smooth your hair down, 'fore you put it on. Here, stop a minute. Why, you're shakin' like a leaf."

She was seeking for the middle of Ida's collar, and when the girl put up her hand Lucy Ann had fastened something there.

"O Lucy Ann!" she breathed, "it's mother's cameo. She gave it to you with her own hands because you took such care of me when I was little. I ain't goin' to let you part with that."

But Lucy Ann was pushing her away.

"I guess nobody ever heard o' bein' married without a weddin' present," she said, in an unsteady voice. "There, you clip it right along, an' when you think's best, you write for your things, an' if I can, I'll express 'em to you."

And Lucy Ann was left standing alone in the moonlight by the lilac bush, and two warm kisses were thrilling on her lips. She was not surprised that Ida should kiss her, though caresses were not common in the family; but Nate had kissed her, too.

Lucy Ann stayed motionless for a little time, thinking what a beautiful night it was and how she should never be able to forget it, and turning away from other things she never thought of nowadays because they seemed to belong to a time so effectually passed that it hardly had to do with her at all. She drew a little sigh like a sob, yet was not all unhappy. The world was going on, she felt in a dim recognition, though she had none of its sharp joys and intimate griefs to make it dear to her. And there would be one bride the more after to-night, and a house and children in it. Then

she went in and crept about the kitchen, putting away the dishes Nate had emptied, and sweeping up his crumbs. When the room was in order she put out the candle and pulled up the shades, and took one glance about her to see that all was as it should be for her sister's eye. The cold early light came stealing in, and she thought again of Sarah Frances. It was a different matter to speed a pair of lovers forth into the bewildering moonlight when the power of the past was upon her and Nate's warm presence gave her valor. But this was the kitchen where Sarah Frances daily commanded her to tasks, all necessary and reasonable, but still welding, with every acquiescence of her own, her sister's mastery. In a little while the sun would strike the old blue mug on the dresser, and it would be time to blaze the fire; and when all the ordered routine of the day shone up before her, always with Sarah Frances at its head, she trembled and with a last flicker of the madness of the night, caught at the hem of her departing courage and bade it serve her one half hour more. Unless she fought out the moment now, she could not fight at all. Lucy Ann reached her trembling hand to the old horn hanging by the door. She set it to her lips and blew a long dread blast. The sound shook her with a joyous terror, and she blew another and another until the kitchen echoed with it. And then Sarah Frances, the hearth brush in her hand, seized in the moment's haste instead of the poker she had meant to take, was in the stairway, with the wild demand:

"Where is he?"

Lucy Ann began to laugh. She went off into peal after peal, and threw the horn from her to the other

end of the room. It rolled under the dresser, and Sarah Frances regarded it with the incredulous horror of one who sees a treasured possession dealt with so lightly that the very fact confesses the occasion ominous.

"Where's Ida?" she cried sharply. "Has he killed her?"

"Gone to be married," Lucy Ann called back to her out of her hysterical madness, "married — married — married!"

Sarah Frances strode across the space between them and took her by the shoulder.

"Lucy Ann," said she, "I've got a good mind to shake you. What do you mean by blowin' horns in this kitchen, an' the light o' day here an' all, an' screamin' out about folks bein' married — who's she married to?"

Sarah Frances, for some reason, suddenly believed the news was true.

Lucy Ann drew a long breath and shook herself.

"She's married Nate, that's all," she sobbed. "An' I've give her the old valise an' the cameo pin, an' I ain't goin' to watch no more nights, an' I'm 'most as old as you be, Sarah Frances, an' if you was to touch me to shake me, I'd jump into the well."

Sarah Frances looked at her with a grave and estimating eye.

"Why, no, Lucy Ann," she said, "I ain't the least idea o' shakin' you!"



## THE HOUSE OF THE BRIDE

**A**NSEL JAMES, at five o'clock of the summer afternoon, was in the new house, measuring for a corner shelf. He was a robust fellow, something over thirty, with aquiline features and a skin brown and tightly drawn. His blue eyes looked out steadily from their background of tan and seemed the keener for it, like the eyes of all men who live much in the open. He had been thinking about the possibility of the shelf all day while he mowed the east meadow and answered mechanically the pleasantries of the other men. Ansel was much prized by his fellows, but they never hesitated in pelting him with all degrees of banter, because his attention, they knew, was absent, and he never really cared. Actually his mind was on the new house, so perfect now, except for the furniture which would probably never be moved in, that it was hard for him to find place for another addition to its practical uses and its charm.

People were gentle with him over his worship of it. They even refrained from asking, "What you going to do with your house?" when they heard his engagement to Hatty Slate was broken. They were too sorry for Ansel. Hatty Slate was not, they thought, "much consequence," but Ansel must have set his heart upon her, or he wouldn't have built her a gem of a house with a soapstone sink and multitudinous closets, "all

complete." But no one could tell what Ansel felt, not even the uncle and aunt living in his old home "up the road a piece," and whom he had meant to leave when he went into a house of his own.

All that was certain about his side of the affair was that he tended and dressed the house now as if he were adorning it for a bride, fitting it with magic contrivances, all to make woman's work the easier. One night even, Abel Fellows, going past at something after eleven, saw a light there and thought somebody had broken in. So he tiptoed up to the kitchen window and peeped, and there was Ansel, face flushed and hair in a tangle, rubbing down wainscoting as if he had been at it for hours and meant never to stop.

But this moment of the corner shelf was one of the last ones out of the stillest summer day, full of leaves and birds. Ansel had taken a lingering look at the world before coming in, for he knew he should work late. A feeling of solitude was upon him, and an intimate sense of communion with his house. He always had that when he was alone here; whether it was because the house had been the work of his hands or that it rehearsed an unfinished dream, not even he could say. But he had no sooner taken up his plane to run it along the strip of board under his palm than a step struck the porch floor.

At that he frowned, though as the door opened and some one stood there to bid his eyes receive her before she spoke, he had assumed his old attitude of indifferent calm. But when he looked up at her, Ansel did start. This was Janet Gale who lived "down the road" a mile away. She had come within the year to be with

Gran'ma Gale, and Ansel did not know her very well. But he had seen her at church and walking along the country road, taller and of finer build than any of the neighborhood girls, and almost to be afraid of, too, with her calm soft-colored face and her large, deep eyes.

The eyes were what spoke and dominated. They were a living power, and even a startling one because their darkness shone so from the cloud of her soft light hair. Once, at the celebration of the town's two hundredth anniversary, Ansel had stood with her for a difficult ten minutes in a tableau of the first settler and his wife. They two had been chosen because they made, so the neighborhood said, such a likely pair, and they had accepted the call with simplicity, as they did all duties.

To-day Janet had come with a purpose, and she did not hesitate in running for it straight.

"I wanted to ask you something, Mr. James. Gran'ma said it wasn't my place, but I thought I'd rather be the one."

Ansel was looking at her in a kind of alarmed surprise she could not understand. He seemed to come to some sense of his own working disarray, and pushed his fingers up through his hair.

"Won't you sit down?" he asked.

There was one chair, a rough kitchen one, sometimes to be sawed on, sometimes piled with nails and cleats. She shook her head briefly and continued:

"No. I've only come for a minute. Mr. James, it's about your house." There she flushed, for she evidently felt her feet to be on ticklish ground. Ansel

frowned a little and stood immovable, facing her. Whoever paved the way to talk, it would not be he. This she realized, and herself frowned with the sudden difficulty of it. But she was a young woman of direct address, and threw down obstacles by a dash and onset. "Mr. James, maybe you didn't know I was engaged to Oscar French." Here she did hesitate, conformably, as if such things were not usually offered with so crude a haste. Ansel nodded and looked at her the more intently, trying, apparently, to make her out. Having got over the introductory step she was more at ease, and took her course with a clear directness. "I haven't seen him for over a year. He's been workin' in Illinois. But he thinks he'll come home."

"Oh!" Ansel accorded.

"He wants to come here to live, maybe set up a shop, or get a piece of land and keep bees. I don't know how it'll turn out." She forgot him for a moment, he could see, her fine brows knitted in consideration of the doubtful question of bees and their swarming, and the price of honey. "Well!" she recalled herself and turned to him with a sudden smile. It warmed her face wonderfully, and moved his heart, too, in a way quite aside from her simple purposes. "Well, if we settle down here, the first thing'll be a house."

"I see," said Ansel gravely. "I see."

He stood quite still, not looking at her now, one hand resting on his bench, the other at his side, a perfect picture of the artisan in repose. She began again and now she hurried.

"I thought of your house. I couldn't help thinkin' of it. It's the prettiest house I ever saw in my life,

and gran'ma said maybe you'd sell or let. But she said it wasn't my place to ask you. She said 'twas a man's place. But there's Oscar way out in Illinois, and here I am on the spot."

It seemed a perfect reason, especially when she looked at him in that soft, kind way.

"I see," said Ansel again. "You want to hire my house."

"Hire it or buy it. I couldn't say about buyin'. Oscar never's gone so far as that. I don't know —" She hesitated an embarrassed moment, but with a certain dignity went on, "I don't know whether he could. I don't know exactly how Oscar's fixed."

Ansel found himself wanting to leap off here at a tangent and ask her whether she was going to marry a man she estimated at a random guess. But he pulled himself back to the house.

"Let or sell," he said, "I s'pose it's all one to me. It ain't likely I shall ever go into the house."

But his face contracted, as he said it, and she hastened on.

"Gran'ma said you told her so. 'Twas when she offered you some balm and wormwood. If you hadn't said as much as that, I never'd asked you."

Ansel smiled a little.

"Wormwood's all right," he corrected, with his gentle humor, "for a house a man builds and never lives in. Well!" He shook his head, as if he threw off deadening dreams. "Want to go over it?" he asked abruptly. "Want to see the house?"

She brightened at that and came at once out of her perplexity of wondering whether she ought to be in

the business at all. So they began their slow and admiring progress, for Ansel was as frankly eager over it as she. He showed her all his little devices for beauty and for saving work, and pointed out the window he had cut after there seemed to be windows enough, to bring the tip of the big maple into the bedroom. When they went upstairs and he opened the drawers of the linen closet, fragrant with new wood, she began to feel the excitement of the bride, an emotion made up of delight in the things themselves and a sense of the strangeness of it all. She had not dwelt much on the overthrow of his hopes. Gran'ma, so old that her opinions got easily blurred and their expression rather negative, had said only that Ansel meant to get married, and she guessed it never came to anything, and Janet, instinctively solitary in her habit of life, had asked no one else.

Finally, they went "up attic," and Ansel took her to the big dormer he had thrown out at the back, just, he told her, to face Mount Everlasting. And there, by natural consent, they sat down on the window seat and followed the purple outline in the farthest sky. Janet recalled her gaze. She was looking straight at him now, and her eyes drew his. He thought he had never seen such soft, dark eyes except in some kind animal, and he almost forgot Janet herself in regarding them, as if they were a separate source of power and life. Janet, calm as she was by nature, looked vivid. She was, Ansel saw, in love with the house. He, too, was in love with it, and he felt the reasonableness of their accord.

"Well," she said, as if she could not hold silence any

longer, her desire was so big, "goin' to let me have it?"

Ansel did not answer. It hardly seemed important, compared with the riddle of her eyes.

"Am I," said Janet imperatively, "am I goin' to have it?"

That recalled him. He seemed to catch himself back out of some deep musing.

"I'd rather you'd have it," he said, "than anybody else."

"Then may I?"

"Anybody I know of," he clenched it, and then with a headlong haste, "anybody in the world."

That surprised her, and her eyes gravely questioned.

"But I don't know," said Ansel, also recalled perhaps by his own intemperate speech. "I've got to think about it."

She rose at that, her mission being over, and the dusk outside shutting out Mount Everlasting more and more and so advising her that the reason for being there was done.

"Well," she said, "you think about it."

"Be careful of the stairs," Ansel bade her, and she returned with a joyous note in her voice:

"Couldn't anybody fall on these stairs. I don't believe gran'ma could. They're so easy, and the rail's just in the right place."

Ansel knew the meaning of that tone. She loved the house and thought it almost hers.

When he stood in the doorway watching her down the steps, he called out suddenly and she stopped.

"Wait a minute," said Ansel. "When's it goin' to be?"

She stood there, a heroic figure in the dusk.

"When's what goin' to be?" she parried, in the thrilling voice responsive to that nearing change.

"The weddin'. When's he comin' on?"

"In about a month," said Janet. "That's when he's comin' on."

Then the dusk enveloped her. Ansel went in, not to work, but to think it over. The little shelf he laid aside. It was not finished that night or the next. Indeed, it was not put up for months, until a winter day when he was still thinking of these things, but after another fashion. The next night he brushed his hair rigorously and went up to see her. Janet was sitting on the steps of the little low-browed house, and gran'ma, her chair drawn close to the entry sill, dozed and dropped a few words at intervals, like leaves from an autumn tree. Janet, in her white dress, looked like the spring itself, a tree all over bridal white, and so Ansel thought, in other terms, as he came up the path and saw her rise to meet him.

"Good evening," she said, in her sweet, full voice. "Gran'ma, here's Mr. James."

"That you, Ansel?" gran'ma asked, from the depths of her revery. "Well, you better come in, both o' you. It's gittin' damp. I guess I'll poke off to bed."

"You leave your chair," Janet bade her. "I'll fetch it in when I come. We'll sit here a minute, it's so nice."

But Ansel did not sit at once. Instead, he stood before her, his tall bulk seeming to top the syringa down by the gate and shut it out. But its breath came sweetly to them.



"When d'you say he's comin'?" he asked abruptly.

"In about a month."

Her heart beat hard. Janet was a calm creature, but sometimes she wanted things overwhelmingly.

"I s'pose we needn't mention it to anybody, need we?" Ansel was continuing. "We needn't mention it till then. I hate talk."

"Why, no," said Janet, wondering a little, but thinking it reasonable of him. "I don't see's we need to mention it."

"Not to gran'ma?"

"Not if you don't want I should."

"Well, I don't," said Ansel. He drew a breath of greater ease. "I get so tired of their clack. If you could only do anything, and done with it! But you can't. It's, 'Why do ye so?' north, east, south and west. It's like a flock o' blackbirds goin' full tilt."

Janet gave a little laugh. It had a more thrilling music than her speech.

"But I ain't got anything to tell," she said, "not yet."

He answered soberly, with a grave indulgence, as to a beseeching child.

"Well, I guess you'll get it."

"Get the house? Shall I get the house?"

"I guess so." She drew a long, happy breath, and he saw again how much she cared. "We can keep our own counsel," he said, "till he comes and the papers are passed. Or if he rents it — it's all one to me."

Janet could simply say nothing at all. They sat there in the soft summer night, she very happy indeed and he, too, happy, in a way, because the house was,

after all, fulfilling its purpose and coming to beautiful use. He was the first to speak.

"Well," he said softly, "you've got your house." Janet put out her hand to him in the darkness, and he gave it a strong, quick clasp. "That's right," he said. "Shake hands on it. It's a bargain." Ansel was a man of few words, except when he was deeply moved, yet he had a little more to say, of a solemn import as befitted the sacredness of the hour. "I hope it'll be blessed to you," he ended, in what used to be his father's prayer-meeting manner. "I hope you'll live in it a great many years."

He stopped abruptly, because he had a sudden vision of the Janet she would be sometime with her children about her, always calm, and miraculously young. But this was too swift a pace. It made him light-headed, and he returned, impatient of it, to what was. "Now," said he, "as you think it over, is there any changes you'd like made?"

"Oh, no," said Janet fervently. "It's lovely, just as it is. It's a perfect house."

"I can't find much fault with it myself," said Ansel, in the tone of disparaging pride accorded our best beloved. "There's the lilacs, now. I set out five, three purple and two white, right side the back door. I don't know's I called attention to them."

She hadn't thought of them, she owned. She had been too occupied with walls and windows.

"Were you anyways interested in a mite of a garden?"

This he put almost timidly, fearing, it seemed, lest her answer should not fit his wish.

"Yes," said Janet, "there's got to be a garden. You know, it seems if it happened for all the world as if 'twas meant, gran'ma's got so out with hers. She says she can't 'tend to it, and it sorts of frets her to have other folks fiddlin' round in it, and realize she can't. So she was goin' to give me her perennials if I got a house anywheres round here."

"Well," said Ansel, in his quiet voice, "come fall, you can move it lock, stock and barrel. I'll kind o' get the beds ready, 'most any time now, and mebbe put a fence round. You'd like that, I guess, and a little gate for you to go steppin' through. You walk down that way to-morrer night after work and you see if I've picked out the right spot."

"But you don't want folks to know. What'll they think if they go by and see me?"

"Oh, folks won't see you! They're to home that time o' night, doin' the chores. I'll be spadn' up, and s'pose anybody does go by? They'll think you stopped to speak."

The next day it came about as he had said. Janet, perhaps too proud to go by dusk when eyes could be evaded, appeared in the late afternoon, as soon as there was hope of finding him. Ansel had staked out a goodly plot at the back of the house. Here were to be her flowers, and behind them he had decreed the kitchen garden. Just as she came round the corner, her face alight, her hair alive in the sun, Ansel had stopped to verify his corners, and he looked up and saw her. He caught his breath, she was so alive and lovely, so calm, too, a part of the divineness of the dying day; but he asked her quietly:

"How's this seem to you?"

"It's nice," she told him. "It's the right place exactly. But you think it's big enough?"

Ansel laughed a little at her greediness.

"You goin' to take care of it yourself?" he asked her.

"Oh, yes. I'm just like gran'ma. I don't want folks fiddlin' round among my plants. Besides, I don't know —" Here she stopped, and her face grew almost whimsically aghast.

"What don't you know?"

"I don't know whether he cares anything about gardenin'. He's always worked in a store."

Ansel turned abruptly and paced the lower boundary once and back again.

"Well," he said, as if he had been thinking out something and quieting himself to a conclusion, "I guess, whether he cares about it or no, he'll be ready to do the heft of it for you."

"Is there a gate here?" He saw she was standing already in her garden. She even seemed to see the invisible gate. He also stood in the inclosure not yet made, and for a moment tasted the delight of feeling, not that he was sacrificing something to a happiness he could never share, but that the garden was still his because she let him plan it for her.

"Yes," he said, "a little gate, green, made narrer so's to swing easy over the grass. Here'll be a nice bed down by this pear tree. I vowed I'd get the pear tree in. Some things want a mite o' shade. They're as homesick as a cat, set 'em out in the glare. Then

over by this corner's the old well. I'll put a pump in here; the water'll be terrible handy."

Janet stood there dreamily, still looking, it seemed, at the garden not yet born, at other happy things hastening toward her, and the lover who was the god to summon them. Ansel followed her thought, and stood still.

"Well," she said abruptly, coming out of her dream. "I'll be goin'." But halfway to the road she turned and hastened back. Her face was flushed in a delicate way it had, a creeping of color under the roseate skin. She held her hand over her eyes to shield them from the burning sunset, and looked at him with a soft, warm kindliness. "I ain't thanked you enough," she said. "I can't ever thank you."

Then she turned decisively and went. Ansel stood, after she had left the garden lonely, and himself looked off into the sunset, fading now, yet entrancing in isles and lakes of color, mountains, and a green-blue bordering shore. He had a fanciful habit of thought, and it seemed to him now that his grandfather who, being old, had uttered many uncomprehended things to him, then a boy, had known what he was saying when he told him, concerning the scheme of all things, "It's a mystery. It's a dinged mystery." Here Ansel had built his house and been denied the living in it, and now he was seeing the happiness that enwrapped it like great guardian wings, through other eyes. And actually through her eyes — for he felt he knew, by some secret divination, the course of her days here, her progress from one room to another, and her long still hours of

work in the garden by the earliest light. She would know enough for that. She had learned unerringly, he could see, the ways of doing things. And perhaps he should see her when he went by on some early quest, and step in a minute, and she would look up from under the pear tree, again with that rosy gratitude.

For a month it went on, the last exquisite ordering of the house and the enclosing of the garden. The beds were made, the fence was painted green, and the little gate swung easily, yet with security. Neighbors dropped in to admire the completeness of it all, and to venture irrepressible questions.

"What you goin' to do with your house, Ansel?" they asked him boldly. "You goin' to live in it?"

But they were never told, and Janet, when one astute old body inquired why she was pokin' round there so much, replied, with her head held high, that it was the nicest house she ever saw or anybody else either, and she was bewitched with it. She couldn't hardly keep her feet away from it. And when the month was over, Oscar French came. Ansel had walked up to gran'-ma's the night before and given Janet the key.

"You better have this," he said. "You'll want to show him round."

She nodded silently, and Ansel knew he had done the irrevocable deed. He had locked himself outside. This was Thursday, and Friday afternoon he saw her go past in Beasley's wagon, driving to the station, he knew, and he felt vaguely hurt that she had not asked him for his own team. But when she came back he was down in the lower pasture, and Saturday morning early he went there again with his dinner pail and ax,

and spent the day. It was a long day, wherein he felt removed from the world and all the conditions of it. He had done the very largest thing that had ever been his choice, and by doing it he had cut himself off from the smaller pleasures and inheritances.

He knew definitely now that he should never settle anywhere. He could never have a house like this one, raised and finished by his youth and hope and the best part of his brain; therefore he would have no house at all. Life looked to him dun-colored, full of the sounding of a solemn voice that had bidden him step aside and let love enter where disappointment had built the door. He went home that night a sadder man, different, older, it seemed to him, and because the day had tired him, he slipped into bed early and dulled his mind of thought. Sunday morning he was late at the table and portly Aunt Lindy, dallying there as she liked an excuse for doing, poured his coffee and settled to a cozy gossip. She loved to endow him with her accumulated nothings because he received them patiently, not like Uncle Rufus, her husband, who had sciatica, and was prone to say "There! there!"

"D'you know Oscar French was here?" she asked.

Ansel nodded, but she hardly needed that slight lubricant.

"Come Friday. Janet went over after him. Handsome feller, straight as a ramrod. I see 'em ride by."

Ansel drank his coffee, and found, by an involuntary hatefulness of the mind, a god-like youth, straight as a ramrod, sitting in the grandfather chair beside his hearth. At that instant, it seemed almost too hard a thing Janet had asked of him. When he could in

kindness escape Aunt Lindy's monologue, full of speculation now over what Janet, if she should marry this fall, was likely to do about gran'ma, he wandered out into the woods at the back of the house and sat there whittling, making little dooryards of twigs and brushing them away again when he found whither his mind was tending.

It came to him that he could not, for the first time since his building of it, go into his own house; another man had the key and it was impossible to meet him there. But about sunset it seemed to him unnecessary to bear it any more. It was probable that they would have visited the house by daylight. This was his hour, as it always had been, the coming dusk when tasks were done and he could take refuge in the stronghold of serenity he had made, as some patient creature might, grain by grain, build its own fitting shell.

So he went across lots, the back way, and approached the house stealthily almost, through the little garden. He mounted the steps to the back porch. It was very still. He took out his knife and slipped it in at a crack of the door to turn a button he knew, and walked in. Ansel drew a breath of satisfaction. It was his house, something sentient almost, that seemed even to return his love, as gardens breathe out rapture toward the hand that tends them. He sank down on his bench, moved into a corner to leave a garnished order for the coming bridegroom; but that instant he started up again. There was the turning of a key, and some one whirled tempestuously in. He knew who it was, and that no one was behind her. Janet had changed into a creature of wild yet still emotion. She spoke at once.



"I had to come. I had to have some place, so gran'ma shouldn't know."

Some place to cry, he saw, to quiet her racing pulses and still the blood aflame up to her hair. She began to pace back and forth from the hearth to the doorway, like an animal in bounds.

"What is it?" asked Ansel, when she seemed to have walked herself into a calm. "You tell me what it is."

"He's gone," said Janet.

"Gone?" he echoed, his own emotion rising, anger for her, resentment against the fool who had deserted her. "You give me half a day. I'll fetch him back to you."

"Fetch him back!" She stopped and looked at him superbly. "He's gone. I sent him."

"You sent him? What for, Janet, what for?"

She cried a little then, in shame, it almost seemed, as if she blamed herself.

"For nothin'. He hadn't done anything. He was just himself. But I don't like him."

Ansel, in his daze, felt that he could only repeat her words after her, in a foolish interrogative echo. But she was ready enough to tell.

"I've got to speak to somebody or I shall die. I'm so ashamed. How could I ever think I liked him? Why, he talks about gettin' cold — he talks about it all the time — and what lodges he belongs to. I don't like him, that's all there is about it. I just don't like him." Fair, large creature as she was, she looked like a willful child. "He hates gardenin', too," she threw at him. "He thinks you get your ankles dusty."

"Well," said Ansel. His voice sounded hoarse and

strained to him, and he stopped to clear it. "What about the house? What'd he say to that?"

"The house?" She looked at him in the amazement that kept her head so high. "You s'pose I brought him in here? You s'pose I'd take him into this house? Why, it's your house, not his."

Ansel was beside himself before the power of her proud beauty and the thrilling force of her emotion.

"It ain't my house," he cried. "It's yours. You've got to live in it."

Janet calmed at that; she smiled, and shook her head.

"You're sorry for me," she told him. "No, you mustn't be so sorry as all that. Sometime you'll live in the house yourself. That's the best way. It's your house. Here's the key. I'm goin' now. Good-night."

But Ansel reached the door first and stood with his back against it.

"Look here," said he, roughly, she thought, unlike his gentle self, "do you want to know why I ain't livin' in this house to-day?"

"Never mind," she said gently. "I've got to go now."

"I do mind," said Ansel. "You've got to mind, too. You've got to listen. The girl I was engaged to broke off with me for one reason. Want to know what it was? 'Twas you. You were the reason."

"Me, Ansel?"

She used his name unthinkingly, and neither of them noticed.

"Yes, you. That time I stood holdin' your hand in the townhall I trembled all over, you were so — so different. And I couldn't help talkin' about you. I

couldn't keep your name off my lips. And I dreamed about you, and when I thought you were goin' anywheres, I wouldn't go, for I wouldn't see you. I didn't dare to. And the girl I was engaged to said to me right out, 'You're in love with Janet Gale.' "

She had grown white, and her breath came heavily. But her eyes did not leave his face, nor did his cease to hold them.

"And when she said that to me," he went on in what seemed his rage at the overwhelmingness of the tide of life, "I said, 'I am, God help me, I am.' And she said, 'She's engaged to another man. What you goin' to do?' And I says, 'Nothin'. There's nothin' for me to do.' "

Again their eyes seemed to interrogate each other sternly.

"But there's somethin' to do now," Ansel continued. He threw back his head and laughed. Janet thought she had never imagined how he would look if he were happy. "I can give you the house — your house. You and gran'ma can live in it, and I can tend the garden, and by and by, when you can think of a man, who knows —"

He paused, dumb with the coming wonder of it; but Janet knew no staying. She was one of the women who, having something to give, must pour it out at once.

"Why, don't you see? Ansel, don't you see? I couldn't have him live in your house. 'Twas because 'twas your house. 'Twas because we'd got so well acquainted, Ansel. Don't you see?"

## A QUESTION OF WILLS

“**N**OW,” said Althea Webb, “you think you’re all right?”

She had put a great stick into the stove, and left the tea-kettle on the flat place at the back, and piled a comforter and a blanket on a chair where the sick man could reach them. She had given him his simple supper and washed the dishes, and now she was going home for the night. Cyrus Cobb was an old man with a face seamed by a thousand wrinkles, all tending to the point of a puckered weazening. His eyes had withdrawn until they were only pin-points of an opaque blue, and his white hair was cut short. He was a clean old man, and didn’t want, he said, to see loose ends straggling over the sheets. Althea, a slender, sanguine-colored woman of thirty, stood looking at him with the mixture of compassion and annoyance she always felt for him. It seemed to her ridiculous that she should leave her dressmaking twice or three times a day and walk half a mile to tidy up a sick old man who had probably money enough to hire a nurse. Yet he wouldn’t hire the nurse, and the town, at this stage of his illness, wouldn’t take him in hand; and Althea, following in her mind the course of his discomfort from hour to hour as she sat at her sewing, would throw down her needle, when the unspoken summons came too loudly, and run

to rescue him. He took her ministrations with a natural sort of courtesy, but to-night he wished to talk.

"Se' down," he said. "You ain't got to fly like a bumble-bee the minute he's loaded up."

Althea felt perverse, like contradicting him. She was tired, and at that moment it seemed desirable to be tucked into a clean bed with a long night before you, even if you had to be seventy-six years old and partly paralyzed to get there.

"I ain't got time to set," said she. "I'm goin' to be up half the night as 'tis."

"What ye set up so late for?" Cyrus inquired. "Ye won't get no beauty sleep."

Althea had the impression that she was a plain woman, and this seemed like flouting her. She answered the more brusquely.

"I've got to set up to finish a blue poplin that's promised for to-morrer. The girl's goin' to wear it to-morrer night, an' I wouldn't disappoint her for nothin'."

"Oh," said Cyrus reflectively. Althea made another movement to go. "Se' down, se' down," he bade her. "I guess if you had the numb palsy you'd want anybody to shorten the night a half an hour or so by settin' by."

The appeal was too much for Althea. She sat down and loosened her coat.

"Well," she said, with hostility intended rather to hearten herself to resist his importunity than to add another burden to the night. "What is it, Mr. Cobb?"

Cyrus was smiling a little, after his own way. At

least, his eyes withdrew a degree farther into their hiding-places, and his mouth widened in a queer pucker quite new to anything Althea had seen in it. She was gazing at it, fascinated.

"That ain't no way to speak to a man that's got the numb palsy," said Cyrus Cobb. "You better be kinder pleasant. I guess you'd want anybody to be if you had to lay here from sundown to rise, hearin' the clock tick."

Althea was conquered. She threw back her coat.

"Want I should read you the paper?" she inquired, with a fictitious cheerfulness.

"No," said Cyrus, "I don't. I want ye to tell me suthin' that's 'livenin', suthin't I can kinder study on whiles I'm layin' here alone."

Althea plucked up courage.

"I tell you, Mr. Cobb," she said, "it's a sin an' a shame for you to be here alone, anyway, sick as you be. You'd ought to have a nurse."

The smile had disappeared. Althea, looking at the old face, wished she had not dared so much.

"When'd you move here?" he inquired brusquely.

"I've been here 'most eight months now," Althea told him, glad to embark on a topic so little likely to offend.

"What d'ye come for?" old Cyrus queried. "Why didn't ye stay where ye was?"

"My brother married," said Althea. "He an' I'd been keepin' house together — ever since he was fourteen."

"Turned ye out, did they?" chuckled Cyrus. "Cut ye adrift an' told ye ye could swim for't."

Althea answered with dignity, though her voice, in spite of her, did choke a little.

"I made up my mind to go. Seemed best I should. An' I heard of this little house, an' the rent wa'n't much, an' I thought the girls in the 'cademy'd be wantin' dressmakin', an' that's my trade — an' so I come."

"Well," said Cyrus, and from the tone of his voice Althea suspected this was the question he was leading up to, "what set you on to poke off over here an' do so much for me?"

"Why, Mr. Cobb," said Althea, indignantly, for it seemed to her he ought not to need the answer, "you know as well as I do you fell down that day I was goin' by. Don't you know you fell, right out here in the yard?"

Cyrus ignored that question.

"An' I'll warrant the neighbors have been talkin' about me, ain't they?" he suggested. "They've told ye I'm a miser, an' I might have nusses day an' night an' I won't."

"Yes, Mr. Cobb," said Althea, plucking up courage, "folks say you've got plenty to do with."

"An' they say I'm sleepin' on a husk bed, an' the husks all mixed in with dollars. Ain't they told you that?"

"Tain't a husk bed," said Althea irrelevantly, glad to escape for even a momentary excursion from the point. "It's a good feather tick, an' I've turned it myself a dozen times."

"An' they say I've quarreled with the only nephew I ever had, an' he's gone off to live by himself down to Joyce's Bridge. An' if I hadn't broke up his marryin'

Rosabel Lee he'd ha' been with me to this day. Don't they say that now?"

"I ain't goin' to set here an' be catechized," said Althea, drawing her coat together. "I'll be up in the mornin', Mr. Cobb, an' I'll bring you as nice a square o' johnny-cake as ever you see. Don't you think you could eat a mite o' johnny-cake?"

"I'll tell you this," said Cyrus. "You're the only woman creatur' that's lifted a finger for me sence I fell down out amongst the tansy. An' I won't forgit it of ye. An' if I should cross my nephew out o' my will, I don't say what I'd do if the minister should call an' his two darters with him. He could write, an' they'd be witnesses. But this I will say. You stan' by me an' I'll stan' by you. Now you run along an' finish the cal-iker gownd."

Althea never knew how she got out of the room, but in a moment she realized that she was almost running along the river road to her home. She was in a state of tremulous excitement, which she took at first to be anger. It seemed to her Cyrus Cobb had no business to call upon her pity by painting so cruel a picture of his lonely state. "The idea!" she said aloud, as she stepped into her little entry and felt the kindness of the walls envelop her as it always did, even at the first minute of home-coming. Althea had never had a house of her own, and this hired one had begun to fit her very comfortably. "The idea o' his stirrin' me all up talkin' about bein' left alone, an' his nephew an' all, when I'm doin' the most I can, gittin' him a bite an' makin' up his bed for him. I guess I've got my own life to live, even if he is alone."



She took off her things and lighted her shining lamp, and then, because it seemed to her she needed some little indulgence, made milk toast for supper. But as she sat at the table later, pouring herself a cup of tea, she was conscious that she had not calmed at all. Her heart was racing, and she felt the blood in her face. Althea set down her cup.

"Why," said she, "I ain't upset because he pleaded up his lonesomeness. I'm thinkin' about that will."

It was true. Her mind had got away from her, and it was planning, in spite of rigid censorship, what she would do with Cyrus Cobb's money if he left it to her. She could not stop. "He is going to leave it to you," said her mind. "He as good as said so. And it's right he should. You've done for him when nobody else would, and when his own flesh and blood threw him over you took him up."

Althea was so excited that she almost felt unable to sew hooks and eyes on the new poplin, lest she shouldn't space them right. It seemed to her she was made. Suppose he hadn't a great deal of money? There ought at least to be enough to buy the little house she was hiring and its two good acres of land. Would the neighbors so positively call him a miser if he hadn't a good round sum in hiding? Finally she did bring her soaring mind down to hooks and eyes, and finished the dress in an exalted haste. But before she went to bed the clock had struck midnight, and still her dreams went on. There might be money enough to take away the partition between the two back rooms and give her a large living-room with a window toward the east. She might even have a knocker like the one on the handsom-

est house in her native town; and there was the remotest possibility that she could have a honeysuckle trellis over the front door. All that night, it seemed to Althea, she dreamed of houses and lands and people arriving out of the past and saying, as they walked up the peony-bordered path, "Why, Althea, what a nice house you've got!" But in the morning the house and its trellis and the admiring visitors did not look the same. They were still the topmost pinnacle of desire; but Althea found herself too tired to speculate on them. She felt too serious as she stirred the johnny-cake she had promised Cyrus Cobb, too jaded now to care whether she had it for herself, but doing it to fulfill her word. When it was done she ate a piece hastily, standing at the kitchen table, and tucked the rest into a little basket and covered it with a fine white cloth. Then, with the basket in one hand and the dress in the other, to be delivered after she had started Cyrus on his day, she set out along the river road.

Cyrus looked acridly cheerful in the morning light. Again it seemed to Althea that his lot was perhaps most enviable, to lie in bed until his johnny-cake was brought to him.

"Why," said she, pulling up the light stand for his tray, "you don't look the same man, Mr. Cobb. Ain't you better?"

Cyrus pulled a wry face.

"What d'you want to talk to a man that's got the numb palsy about bein' better for?" he inquired.

Althea was making him a cup of tea. Now she glanced at him guiltily, because he had once bade her put in only a teaspoonful and none for the pot, and she

knew her tremulous hand had exceeded the measure. The change in his face struck her anew. Now she understood it.

"Why, Mr. Cobb," said she, "you've been up an' shaved you."

"Been up?" repeated Cyrus. "How d'ye think a man's goin' to stan' up afore the glass if he's got the numb palsy on him? I guess it's enough if I crawl out into the shed and bring in a stick o' wood when I lay here neglected, 'thout standin' up afore the glass an' shavin' me."

But he did look better from the removal of his stubby beard, and Althea's spirits rose. She brought him his cup of tea with a cheerful grace. The farther Cyrus Cobb seemed to be from the gate of death, the more willing grew her service to him. She made haste that morning in setting the room in order, and even, it seemed, hurried his eating a little.

"Don't you think," she ventured, at the door, the poplin in her hand—"don't you think, Mr. Cobb, some o' the other neighbors'll be in an' do a hand's turn for ye to-day?"

"No," said Cyrus cheerfully, "not a livin' soul. Ye see, they know about them greenbacks scattered through the feathers I'm layin' on, an' they think if I want to be nussed I better take out my pocket-book an' pay for 't. No, you're the only one that's likely to cross the threshold this day. An' seems reasonable, too, for you to be the one. Ye know what I told ye. My will ain't finished; but when 'tis I know who'll come into the greenbacks. I might as well tell ye it's somebody 'taint more'n a mile away."

Althea felt her face hot with shame that was, she knew, for her own state of mind and not for his.

"Mr. Cobb," said she humbly, "I wish you wouldn't talk about such things."

"Why do ye?" Cyrus Cobb inquired. Something like mirth was gleaming in his little eyes. "Don't ye want to be my heir?"

"I don't want you to talk about it," said Althea.

In another minute, she knew, she must foolishly break down and cry.

"Oh," said Cyrus, "you're willin' I should leave ye the money, but ye don't want I should talk about it. Well, I ain't left it to ye yet. The minister ain't been in. But if you should come acrost him on the road you jest tell him old Cyrus Cobb wants to see him half an hour or so, an' tell him to bring along his gals."

Althea could not answer. She walked out of the house and shut the door behind her, and then, while she paused a moment wondering whether she ought not to have left the county paper within his reach, she heard him laugh. It was not the sly cackle he seemed to keep for her. It was a man's honest, rolling mirth. In some way not to be understood, Cyrus Cobb was laughing at her, and Althea went on with her tight little chin held firm and high. It almost seemed as if he had some power of tormenting her in small, irritating ways, for she did meet the minister near the village, driving his sober gray. The minister was a tall, thin man, very serious, even out of the pulpit, and with a scrupulous courtesy of manner that kept his flock at a distance from him. He could never tell why they failed to show him the warm human side he knew they showed

one another, and, fearing it was a fault of his manner, treated them the more scrupulously. And so they were the more afraid. Now, seeing Althea, he drew up the plodding horse.

“Good morning,” said he. “I hope you are very well.”

“Yes, sir, thank you,” said Althea. “As well as common.”

“I hear you have been very kindly looking after Mr. Cobb,” said the minister. “What is the latest news from him?”

“He looked better, sir, this mornin’,” said Althea.

“Then perhaps I won’t go there to-day,” said the minister. “I am somewhat hurried. Did he say anything about seeing me?”

“He looked better this mornin’,” repeated Althea desperately. She was hurrying on, but that seemed to her so great a discourtesy to such a dignified minister that she almost expected him to call her back and say, “Althea Webb, you may stay fifteen minutes after church next Sunday.” But the minister was driving on, and when Althea gained the courage to look round she saw his carriage-top bobbing down the hill.

The first thing Cyrus Cobb asked her that night when she went to carry him some broth seemed to her a proof that he had an uncanny knowledge of the things that were keeping her distraught.

“D’you see the minister to-day?”

“Yes,” said Althea, stirring the broth. She wondered if it felt as hot as her face.

“D’you tell him to come over an’ bring his darters?” Cyrus Cobb pursued.

“No,” said Althea, adding, as if she were driven to an exasperated emphasis — “no, Mr. Cobb, I didn’t.”

And again Cyrus Cobb laughed. This time it was his cackling laugh, and Althea wondered at herself that so sick a man should seem to her so hateful.

But that night, when she was again beside her little warm stove, and the peace of evening settled about her, the dreams began again. It was not only a honey-suckle trellis she longed for now; she was wondering whether a south veranda and a trumpet vine mightn’t come within the scope of Cyrus Cobb’s money. It even seemed to her she had been a little too topping not to send the minister on to Cyrus Cobb’s. It would have been different if old Cyrus had not told her to. Since he had, it would have been no responsibility of hers. And before she slept she wondered how much money she might reasonably hope he had.

All through the next week it seemed to Althea less and less likely that she could ever again get that money out of her mind. She had spent it a dozen times in fancy with the passing of every day. And all the time she was taking care of the old man with a more desperate kindness. She even did his washing now, and because it had been ill done for a long time, was boiling his sheets until her little kitchen was a steaming caldron, and bluing them to the exact shade of nicety. And when three weeks had gone she stood inside his kitchen door, just taking her leave after serving him an admirable dinner, and quite to her own surprise, began to cry. Cyrus Cobb hardly looked surprised at all. One of the irritating things about him was that he

always acted as if things were turning out exactly as he had thought they would.

"There, there!" said he. "You better go home an' draw up the clo'es over your head an' take a nap. You're all beat out."

"No, I ain't, either," said Althea. She grasped the roller-towel for a support and cried feebly into it. "I ain't tired. I'm mad, that's what I am. An' it's you that's done it."

"That so?" inquired Cyrus pleasantly. "I guess you've got a kind of a quick temper. I've noticed that in ye."

"An' I ain't comin' here any more," said Althea; "leastways after this week. I'll stay this week out so's you can git another nurse. An' I'll help you look round an' find one if you want I should; but as for me I'm done."

"No, no!" said Cyrus. "You want to think pretty careful 'fore you say a thing like that. You know I promised ye I'd cross my nephew out —"

"Promised!" cried Althea. "No, you didn't, either. I wouldn't ha' taken any such promise. You just said it, that's all. I ain't one to hang round waitin' for dead men's shoes."

With that she flew out of the door; yet, remembering he was a sick man, she shut it carefully behind her. But she did not take the familiar track to her own home. Instead she turned down into the old mill road, hurrying so fast that sometimes her flying feet seemed to be running a race with the thoughts that hurried them. Althea had had no dinner. She had taken old Cyrus his that day while the parsnips were at their

best, and she knew a savory plate of them was waiting for her at home. But she could not stay. It seemed to her that she must make all haste as a sinner to the confessional, to purge her mind of what was wearying it. Three miles along, the old mill road began to climb a hill, and it climbed with varying degrees of steepness for one mile more. The day was cold and clear, a winter day, the bright air having much ado to assure you it was winter, there was so little snow on the frozen ground. There were deep ruts in the road for long, wind-swept spaces; and Althea, flying over them, felt them bruise her feet. But she scorned the troubles of the way. The path her mind was treading was far more troublous than the path that hurt her feet.

Near the top the road settled into a hollow before it made up its mind to go climbing on again, and in that sheltered spot, with green wind defenses of its own in groves of tall, dark pine-trees, stood an old gray house. Althea had been told exactly where to find it. Cyrus Cobb himself had told her in one of his tirades against his nephew. She went up the path to the side door, because the only smoke she saw was curling from the kitchen chimney. And just as she passed the window a column of flame ran up within, and she flung open the door, without knocking, and ran to quench it. When she got in she found the room, as she afterward described it to herself, "all of a smudder." A kettle of fat was on the stove. The fat had caught, and just as Althea rushed up to it a tall man, who appeared from somewhere at the moment of her entrance, was before her, and deftly lifted it. Althea held the door open for him, and in short order he flung the kettle into



the snow. Then he turned, ran a blue shirt-sleeved arm over his crimson face, and looked at Althea.

"Gee!" said he, "wa'n't that a conflagration? Who are you, anyway, an' how'd you come here?"

He was a handsome giant, with brown eyes and tousled brown hair; but beyond that first glance at him Althea looked no more. Her thoughts were with the kettle. She stepped gingerly to the edge of the path and peered into the deep snow where it lay still smoking.

"I should think you'd be ashamed," she said, "wastin' good fat like that."

The man roared. He was Cyrus Cobb's nephew Wellman, and Althea had come to find him; but she had never suspected old Cyrus's nephew of being able to laugh like that.

"You don't s'pose I done it for fun, do ye?" he responded. "The fat ketched, that's all. It does 'most every time I fry."

"What was you fryin'?" inquired Althea, leaving her scrutiny of the kettle and stepping back to the door-stone.

"Doughnuts. I threw away the first kittleful," he said, suddenly shamefaced. "They soaked fat."

"Well, you've lost the doughnuts, an' the fat," said Althea bitterly. She was too poor and too thrifty not to sorrow over waste. "What you think you're goin' to do now?"

"Oh, I've got more lard," said Wellman easily. "I keep a lot on hand. It's always ketchin'. I've got another kittle, too. While that's coolin' off I'll stir up some more an' begin over."

Althea followed him into the house. She knew she had to talk to him even in a kitchen with a smudder. He was throwing up windows.

"I guess we've got to git it aired off here," he said, and looked at Althea with much concern. "You warm enough in your things? If you ain't, you better put my old buffalo over your shoulders."

But Althea was throwing off her shawl. She spoke with firmness.

"You set out your mixin'-bowl. I'm goin' to stir you up some doughnuts. You can put on the fat. But don't you let it ketch."

The blue-shirted giant obeyed her with a perfect simplicity. When he brought her the bowl and the ingredients she masterfully called for, she noted with approval that everything was clean. But when he began scooping out lard from a pail she did challenge him with a tinge of rebuke.

"Don't you save your beef drippin's, too?"

"What's beef drippin's?" returned Wellman, scooping industriously, and Althea liked him the better. She felt her professional superiority.

Althea stirred and braided her dough and cut it into pleasing rounds, and Wellman watched the fat with an equal fascination. When she "tried" a bit of dough and took it out and broke it delicately, his delight knew no bounds. He caught half the morsel out of her hand and tossed it into his mouth.

"By George!" said he, "ain't you the crowner!"

Presently Althea had a platter full of brown, crusty rings, and then she set the kettle back to cool. She was very hungry. She wondered what would come

next. Wellman was in the next room, burrowing wildly, she could see, in a sideboard drawer. She had time to note how beautiful the sideboard was before he turned, a table-cloth in his hand. It was tumbled, but it was fine linen and it was clean. He came back into the kitchen, put up a leaf of the table where Althea had been stirring her doughnuts, and spread the cloth with an awkward hand.

"I'd ha' had a fire in the sittin'-room," he said, "if I'd known you was comin'. But we can't wait for it to git het up in there. I'm as holler as a horn."

Now he brought out a kettle and set it on the stove. Althea could not manage her curiosity. She got up and peered. It was full of something hard and pale.

"Why," said she, "I know what that is. It's corn porridge."

"Sure," said Wellman. "I make a whole iron kittle up to once. Sometimes I freeze a string into a quart or so an' hang it on the sled when I go choppin'."

"Then you build a fire in the woods an' heat it up," said Althea. "Father used to do that. 'Tis a real old-fashioned way."

They sat down at the table, each with a bowl of porridge and a spoon.

"My!" said Althea, "if that don't taste good! I ain't tasted corn porridge sence I was little. You don't make it the real old-fashioned style, do ye? Hull the corn an' all?"

"Yes," said Wellman soberly. "Hull it with ashes. I don't know no other way."

When they came to the doughnuts, he proposed coffee, and Althea made it. He had even a wedge of

cheese, and Althea, who had not for months eaten a mouthful not of her own cooking, leaned back at the end and smiled happily.

"I dunno's I ever knew a meal to taste so good," she said. "You're a born cook."

Wellman's eyes smiled back at her.

"Oh," he remarked slyly, "who made the dough-nuts?"

But suddenly, dwelling on his handy ways, Althea found herself swamped by the memory of her wrongs.

"I should think," said she passionately, "you'd be ashamed, a man that can cook as well as you can, not to go an' take care o' your poor uncle."

Wellman looked at her for a long minute before he answered.

"Oh!" he said, at length, "you're Althea Webb, ain't you, that's been takin' care of him?"

"Yes, I be," said Althea. "I've took care of him off an' on for weeks, an' now I'm done."

The man's eyes grew graver in their glance.

"Why?" said he. "Ain't he paid you?"

"I didn't do it for pay," said Althea. "He never asked me to do it, an' I was a fool to begin. But I was goin' by the gate when he fell down there in his own gardin, an' what's anybody goin' to do? The neighbors wouldn't go nigh him because they said he could well afford to hire. But I couldn't let an old man lay there numbed up with palsy, could I, an' not make him a cup o' tea or smooth his bed?"

She was so warm now in her own defense that she choked a little quite angrily, and clasped her hands tighter in her lap, for fear she might cry. Wellman

was looking at her thoughtfully, a new seriousness on his fresh-colored face. He was drumming with his fingers on the table, as if that helped him think.

"Well," he said, "an' so you've done for him till you've got pretty well tired out?"

"No," said Althea, "I ain't tired. 'Tain't that. I'd just as soon do for him. Besides, I kinder like him. He's terrible queer, but he's a good old man, spite of all, an' he does love his joke. No, I ain't so much tired."

"Well, what is it then?"

Now Althea did break down and cried in earnest.

"It's my soul," said she. "It's my immortal soul."

Wellman was gazing at her in a perplexity half alarm. Althea was perfectly aware that he thought her crazy. She hastened to reassure him.

"Why," said she, wiping her eyes, desperately, "he's kep' talkin' about his will. He's as much as promised he'd make it, an' make it in my favor."

"Well," said the man quietly, "don't you want he should?"

"Course I want it," said Althea. "I guess anybody'd know I wanted it if they see how poor I be. That's the trouble. I study on it all the time — what I'd do here an' what I'd do there. I dunno how much money he's got; but whatever 'tis, I've spent it in my mind twenty times over. An' I feel like a murderer an' a thief, an' I can't stan' it no longer. An' if you've got the leastest bit o' compassion in you, you'll go an' make up with your uncle an' take care of him an' let him will you all he's got."

Wellman rose and walked to the window. He stood

there for what seemed to Althea a long time, drumming on the pane. Then he turned to her. His face looked queerly moved and softened, as if what she had been telling him was pleasant news.

"Althea," said he, and it did not seem strange to her that he should use her name, "I s'pose my uncle's told you how we come to blows. No, 'twa'n't quite that, but we were both of us pretty mad."

"No," said Althea, "he never did."

"Well —" He paused again here, and it seemed as if he found it rather hard to go on. But he threw back his head with an impatient gesture and plunged. "I was engaged to a girl down to the Gorge. She's pretty ambitious. She wanted to git on faster'n I thought I could, no matter how hard I worked. So she went to Uncle Cyrus, unbeknown to me, an' told him we'd like a part of what he was goin' to leave me. We'd like it quick, so's I could buy some timber-land I wanted."

"Well," said Althea practically, "I guess your uncle didn't like that any too much."

"No. He thought I'd sent her. He told me so, an' we had a row. An' I ain't seen him sence."

"Now," said Althea pacifically, "if he was a well man 'twould be a different matter. But seein' he's there abed struck down with numb palsy —"

Wellman's face relaxed.

"Uncle ain't got no numb palsy," he told her. "I sent the doctor round the first day I got the news, an' he told me 'twa'n't palsy no more'n 'twas chicken-pox. Doctor knows Uncle Cy. 'He's playin' it on ye, Wellman,' doctor says to me. 'He's well as ever he was. I

bet you when there's nobody there he gits up an' does pretty much as he's mind to. But if he sees anybody comin' he cuts back to bed.' ”

“ But what for? ” cried Althea. “ What's he do it for? ”

“ So's I shall hear he's sick an' come back,” said Wellman easily.

“ Oh, then he wants you should come back? ”

“ Why, yes,” said Wellman, staring at her, as if she must be very stupid indeed. “ Why, he's my own uncle. Mother used to say he set his life by me.”

“ Then all I can say is,” Althea remarked, getting on her feet, “ the neighbors ought to been ashamed not to tell me when they found I was goin' there takin' care of him spite of all I had to do.”

“ Oh, the neighbors don't know,” said Wellman. “ Doctor wouldn't tell.”

Althea was making her way to the door. She felt curiously humbled, as if a bad joke had been played on her. Wellman was watching her, that keen, questioning look in his face, as if he were really determined to understand her absolutely.

“ Well! ” said Althea. “ Well! ” She paused a moment, her hand on the latch; then she spoke with a determined liveliness. “ Anyways, I sha'n't have to go there no more. But I must say — ”

“ What? ” asked Wellman, when she hesitated.

“ I must say I should think that girl'd feel cheap — the one that went a-beggin'—”

“ Oh — her! ” said Wellman scornfully. “ I ain't troubled myself to find out how she felt.”

“ Why ain't you? ” asked Althea boldly.

She felt she had to know.

"Why?" asked Wellman, in a voice that made her start. "Because I ain't no interest in her, that's why. Do you s'pose I'd think twice about a girl that would do a trick like that?"

Althea did not answer.

"Now you set down," said Wellman, in his other tone, the softer one Althea had already begun to know, "an' I'll harness up an' take you along home."

They had a wonderful drive, the first ride, Althea told him, she had had that winter.

"You'd ought to have 'em all the time," said Wellman, still in that moved, soft tone.

When he had left her at her door, he laughed a little at the errand he was bent on.

"I guess I'll go along," he said, "an' see Uncle Cy a minute."

"You won't tell him, will you?" Althea besought.

"About your comin'? No. Not if you'd ruther not."

"You see," said Althea, "it'll please him terribly to think you come of your own free will an' not had anybody drummin' you up. An' don't you forget," she said impulsively, as he turned away, "he's an' old man an' you're a young one."

"I'll call on the way home," said Wellman, "an' let you know how it comes out."

Althea turned back into her house and, although it was in beautiful order, flew over the sitting-room and gave it a touch. Then she ran to her bureau drawer and took out the pink stock and jabot she had made for great occasions. She thought a moment, the pink



chiffon in her hand and a deeper color mounting to her cheeks. She put the chiffon back.

"No," said Althea to herself, "I won't do any such a thing."

The dusk fell, and she lighted her lamp and sewed steadily. Presently there was a sound of hoofs, and of feet on the crisp walk. Althea sewed on, and she let him knock twice before she went to the door. There he stood, very tall and big, and, her heart told her, altogether splendid.

"Well," said he, "'twas all right."

"Won't you come in?" said Althea primly.

"No, not to-night. I've got to get the colt home. He hadn't had his dinner. But Uncle Cy's all right. I left him puttin' in wood."

"D' he own to 't?"

"Playin' it on me? Oh, no! he just said his palsy's better. Said 'twas because you'd been so faithful."

"Old fox!" said Althea.

"He said he's goin' to pay you. Said 'twas wuth it."

"Wuth what?" said Althea.

"Gittin' me back, I s'pose. I never asked him."

"Well, he can put that out o' his mind," said Althea. "I was a fool for my pains, but I ain't goin' to be paid wages for bein' neighborly, even if I *was* a fool."

"Oh, I told him so," said Wellman. "I told him I'd see 't you was paid. 'Twas wuth it to me, I told him."

But Althea did not ask him what he meant.

"Say, Althea," he went on, "what if I should be

round to-morrer about four an' we should go to ride? "

" I — don't — know," said Althea slowly.

" Oh yes, you do. We'll drive over to Lund's tavern an' have supper an' come home by moonlight. There's a moon as big as a cart-wheel. Ain't you seen it? "

Althea thought he might as well know what a quiet, dull body she was in all her habits of life.

" I don't ever go ridin'," she said shyly. " An' I don't ever go round with — men."

" Don't ye, Althea? " he asked softly. " I bet you don't. You're a good girl. But you'll go with me. I'll be round about four."

He was turning away, and she could not find a word. But now he stopped.

" Althea," he said — there was a laugh in his voice — " you might as well know. I've fell in love with you."

## A BRUSH OF PAINT

**A**DELAIDE CRANE stood in the road down by the North Wharf watching her grandfather and Martin Long, younger than he by fifty years, as they sat on the fishermen's bench and glanced idly, yet with the sharpness of sea knowledge, at the boats running up the harbor, and told stories that were a common possession. Adelaide was a handsome gypsy creature all the more vivid at this moment because she was so angry with them, grandfather for being shiftless, to the family discredit, and Martin for according him a fraternal companionship. Martin was a supple youth, all fire and vigor, and with the blue eyes and light hair due, you would have said, to a Scandinavian ancestry, if you had not known that his folks had lived over beyond Beachmore Green ever since the town was settled, two hundred years ago. He was Yankee to the bone, not grasping but turning a penny for the fun of seeing it throw off tens and fifties, and now selling a cargo of fish and again taking a ten-acre lot of hay to cut or a garden spot to till. He was marked out to prosper, and Adelaide had no fear of her future with him; only she wished, as many advantages as he had had, that he would not encourage grandfather in sitting around on wharves and telling ancient stories, especially when grandma was trying to get dinner over the hissing pine limbs she had been obliged to break up because grand-

father was too lazy to split proper wood. Grandfather himself looked like Santa Claus, with a silver-white beard and a hook nose and great black eyebrows. Adelaide was proud of him at Thanksgiving time or funerals, when he put on his broadcloth suit with the satin waistcoat that had been his father's; but now his delinquencies covered him with so disreputable a stain that she told herself he was no better than a tramp or an old wandering peddler. Perhaps it was her thoughts beating upon the men like a hail-storm that made them look up at last. It was just at the end of a story that came out in a glorious burst from grandfather:

"An' the fust time he went out, he took in enough to pay for the net, an' he never ketched a thing sence. Net cost him forty-eight dollars, an' he sold it next spring for three seventy-five because Hitty Ann Luce wanted a bosom-pin with red stones."

Then they both laughed, and Adelaide scorned them afresh. The whole township had bartered that story for twenty-odd years, she knew, because she had heard it when she was in pink tyers going to school. Martin was lowering himself to hoot at it now. He'd better be exerting an influence over grandfather and persuading him to split the waiting cord of wood. But it was in the midst of a lazy "haw-haw," such as two idle fishermen might toss in the face of an unexacting summer day, that they saw her, and Martin came to his feet, unwitting of his own disgrace.

"That you?" he saluted her, and gave grandfather a nod before running up the slope to walk home with her, which was also the way to his dinner. But Ade-

laide paused a moment more to call out to grandfather, in her clear tones, instinct with moral warning:

“Grandmother wants you should split her some wood.”

Grandfather vouchsafed a nod addressed not so much to her as to the sea, whither he was looking with a renewed keenness, because Dave Holland’s new puff boat was just cutting across his field of sight. But Adelaide had done her duty, and she turned away homeward and walked with an alert dignity, while Martin kept glancing at her, from time to time, smiling more and more beguilingly out of his enormous pleasure in her.

“That’s a red bow, ain’t it?” he ventured at length.

“What bow?” asked Adelaide chillingly.

“That one that lashes your collar on.”

“You’ve seen it forty times,” said Adelaide, thawing slightly in spite of herself. “It’s nothing in the world but taffeta.”

All Martin’s compliments went by indirection. He had learned that if he made plain statements of Adelaide’s value, she put them aside with other classified encomiums, whereas if he expressed his admiration in uncouth or abusive terms, she pondered on them afterward, and he thereby acquired merit.

“Never see such a girl,” he remarked disparagingly. “You don’t want anybody to tell you how your clo’es strike ’em, and I s’pose if they were to say that red bow —”

“Pink,” interrupted Adelaide.

“Pink bow was just the color o’ your cheeks and not half so red as your lips, you’d hit ’em a clip under the ear. Never see such a girl!”

At the moment Adelaide did not quite know whether she had been chidden or commended. She put the question away to debate upon.

"I do think you might try," she said hotly, "to get some influence over grandfather."

She had to speak with even more warmth than she felt, because in Martin's company her harsher emotions had a way of melting into something inexplicably soothing.

"Influence?" said Martin. He stared at her, not on the score of the pink bow, but because he found himself off the track. "Your gran'ther's all right. I don't know a more decent chap anywhere's round than old Crane."

"I wish grandma thought so."

"Why, what's the matter of him? I don't believe he ever took too much since the day his father give him his freedom suit. Ever hear him tell o' that, and how he and the other boys found a jug o' cherry brandy and thought 'twas preserves —"

"Oh, yes," said Adelaide, with dignity. "I've heard it a great many times."

"He's all right, Crane is. Why, he's as kind as a cow under a sweet-bough tree."

The tears came into Adelaide's eyes. She felt as if no man understood.

"Grandma has an awful time," she said tremblingly. Martin sobered.

"She does? What kind of a time?"

"Why, he's so shif'less! He won't saw the wood, and he won't cut the grass, and the whole place is going to rack and ruin."

"Well," said Martin hopefully, "it ain't a very big place."

"What difference does that make, I'd like to know? Grandma's as neat as wax, and she can't get even a window-sill painted, nor a screen put in, and the flies are something awful. And it ain't because he can't do things. He's as handy with tools as if he's a carpenter by trade. Everybody knows that. It's just because he's lazy. He'd rather sit on a wharf all over gurry and watch the boats and tell stories a mile long that everybody's heard before."

Martin said nothing at all for a moment. They had quite a long walk up the hill to Beachmore Green where Adelaide and her aunt lived in a little neat house with gables, the whitest of curtains, and prim yet glorious rows of calendula and mourning-bride ruling off the front yard like a splendid quilt.

"Well, you see, Addie," he began, at length, "your gran'ther's had kind of hard lines. He followed the sea, and since the rheumatiz got into his bones and stiffened him up so, he's felt like a fish out o' water. You can't clip a gull's wings and put it in a coop and expect it to act for all the world like a pullet. Nor you can't tame a fox — not to say *tame* it. I expect your gran'ther feels like the mischief most o' the time."

"Well," said Adelaide, "you needn't swear about it."

"Why, that ain't swearin'!"

He opened his eyes amazedly. This was one of the days when she seemed to him not less desirable, only more mysterious.

"Oh," Adelaide returned, "when folks use words like that, everybody knows what they mean."

She was surprising herself in greater measure than she was surprising him. Some perversity had got hold of her. It was whispering her now that men-folks stood by each other till the last gun was fired, and women-folks never had a chance at all unless they lived by themselves in a little orderly house, as she and auntie did. Martin, swamped in his bewilderment, but with no idea of blaming her for the state of things, thought only of making up.

"Well," he was saying in a most beguiling voice, "'twon't be so with you and me when we get into our house. I'm willin' to bet you'll have your wood sawed and your window-sills painted 'fore you ask for 'em."

At that instant Adelaide's parasol came down over her head, and she put it up again with a vicious snap, hating the old frame that had played her false so many times. And for a reason that somehow seemed to be connected with the parasol and also with grandmother's green fuel, she answered sharply:

"I don't know as we shall have any house."

Martin looked at her blankly, and then repeated her words in a stupid-sounding monotone.

"No," said Adelaide, riding swiftly now on the wave of her perversity, "when I look round me I don't see as married folks are having any too good a time."

The hot summer air seemed hotter still about Martin, and he felt as if there were not enough of it to breathe. He took off his hat and passed a hand over his wet forehead. Then he answered mechanically, not as if he chose, but as if he had been bidden by the surprising form of Adelaide's speech:

"So you don't want to get married at all?"



“No,” said Adelaide, also following on the path that seemed decreed by what had gone before, “I’m sure I don’t.”

Just here, as if a full stop had been ordained for them by the malicious imps of the summer day who had also arranged their dialogue, they reached the house with the trim garden and white curtains, and Adelaide opened the gate — swiftly, it seemed, to prevent his helping her — and shut it carefully behind her.

“Good-by,” she said.

“Good-by,” Martin answered; and as she went up the path to the house, he stood, hat in hand, looking gravely at the calendulas and mourning-bride and wondering if he was going to have a sunstroke, his head felt so strange. But as he walked away he suddenly realized that he was a different man because Adelaide was a different girl, and she had told him she did not want to be married at all.

Gran’ther Crane saw no reason for hurrying home to split wood. He stayed on the wharf watching the boats come in and that clever cat of Philpott’s waiting soberly while the fish were dressed, to inherit a fin or a tail, and he exchanged a sympathetic word with Lote Mendall, whose boat had been stove in because the boys who stole it left it out by Crying Gull Rock; and then, since other men were going home to dinner, and the sun seemed to him accurately in midheaven, he rose, stretched himself, took his two canes in hand, and limped along the road to his own house, one of the most valuable places on the coast, it was called by an artist who had sat in the front yard and sketched the bay, with no appreciation of the dearth of paint and

shingles behind him. Dinner was ready and the tang of chowder in the air, the kind gran'ther liked, well ballasted with fish and swamped in onion. Grandma, a tall, active old lady with pink cheeks and blue eyes and the whitest of hair, was in a gentle humor only because he had come. She never did complain. It was Adelaide who fulminated for her; and at this moment, with the perfect chowder on the table and her old housemate at hand, grandma would have denied that her life was not always smooth as a glassy stream. They sat down together and ate assiduously for a minute or two, until the edge of appetite was blunted. Then grandma looked up, and held her spoon poised.

"Well," said she, "I 'most forgot. Who do you s'pose come here this mornin'?"

Gran'ther vouchsafed only a grunt. He was sighing his soul away on seas of chowder.

"A man to buy the place."

Gran'ther stared now under his black brows and took three more crackers at a grasp.

"Yes," grandma went on, in high enjoyment of her narrative and forgetting from time to time to tincture it with the resentment of its opening. "Yes, he wanted to buy. 'Who sent you here with any such arrant as this?' I says. 'Why,' says he, 'I went through here in my auto last week, an' I see 'twas a sightly place. But 'tis terrible out o' repair,' says he. 'Well,' says I, 'it suits us, an' we're the ones that live in it.'"

Gran'ther nodded, in a mild appreciation. He was ignoring the memory of her petitions for paint and whitewash and tightening of windows, quite as she did. That was a part of the game. Mother had thrown in

her lot with his, and whatever household discontent she owned to him in private, she would stand by the place before the world. It was theirs together.

"There ain't a question you could think of but what he asked it," she continued. "Asked me if you follered the sea. 'No,' says I, 'he's all cramped up with rheumatiz.' Asked if we'd ever thought o' movin' away from here. 'No,' says I, 'you couldn't hire us, not if the queen was to send for us an' paid our fare in gold.'"

"It's the king now," gran'ther remarked, over his plate.

But grandma was of those for whom Queen Victoria, like kind words, can never die, and she went on:

"Got any childern to live with if you should give up here?" says he. I begun to get kinder peppery then —"

"Little mite hot under the collar now, ain't ye, mother?" inquired gran'ther.

"Yes," I says, 'we've got two childern livin', an' they're married an' settled out west, an' doin' well, an' 'tain't likely we shall come to want.'"

Gran'ther poised his spoon a moment while he gazed out through the doorway at the blue water of the harbor, crinkling and winking at him. He was remembering the day when Dan, the prospering son, had privately besought him to come west and ply about with him in one of the pilot-boats on the greatest of Great Lakes, and see the life and motion of the world. Mother could go to Mary's, Dan had said, because he could hardly ask them both to live with him, but they should meet surely twice a year. Gran'ther had shaken his head then and made no other answer. It would

kill mother, he opined; but now he saw the boat tackling about in sudden squalls and felt the wind on his face and wondered if it would not make him young again to be in seething life, though it was not possible to govern it any more.

“Well, I couldn’t begin to remember all the questions he put to me,” grandma was saying. “‘Do the skeeters trouble you?’ ‘They do when they bite us,’ says I. ‘Well,’ says he, ‘you tell your husband I’m goin’ through here ag’in come fust o’ September an’ I’ll make ye another call. You think it over,’ says he, ‘an’ tell him to think it over. But it’s terrible out o’ repair.’ That’s his last words—‘it’s terrible out o’ repair.’ When I was mullin’ over it arterwards I said to myself I hardly ever see such an impident creatur’—an’ yet he didn’t set out to be.”

Then she devoted herself to her chowder, and gran’ther, who always distanced her in the race, pushed back his plate and thought a while, soberly. His eyes were on the crinkling bay where the boats were still in happy motion, and the long-past call of youth echoed again and the sting of memory pierced him. For a moment he felt all the strength and passion of the world, and then, as he rose to be out and abroad with it, his legs cramped and hurt, and he remembered he was old Crane and not young Crane, and that instead of starting out to-morrow morning among the boys, to come back with nobody knew how big a haul, he was living on the savings grandma had put by for them in the years when he never cared how money went. And it seemed, in that minute, better to sell the house and go as fast to the Great Lakes as train would

carry him and let grandma settle down at Mary's. He looked at her. She, too, had finished dinner, and now she sat for a moment resting before the task of clearing away, her eyes on the harbor, where they found no luring signal to other things. She looked entirely placid, and gran'ther's guilty heart lifted a little while he told himself she was good for twenty years, and if he had perhaps five years of freedom, they could die together, after all.

"I dunno's there's any reason why we shouldn't live to be a hunderd," he said, and she answered, rousing from her muse:

"What d'you say, father?"

Gran'ther rose and stood a minute, steadyng himself by the table to get his legs into subjection.

"I dunno but I'll poke up to Melcher's an' buy a pot o' paint," said he.

Grandma looked at him, glorified. A flush had come into her cheeks and her eyes lighted with a youthful fervor.

"You ain't goin' to put on paint?" she announced, as if the long desired were also the incredible.

Gran'ther was fitting down his hat, always adjusted with a resolution equaled only by the carelessness of its pulling off.

"Well, well," said he fretfully, "we'll see. We'll see."

He hardly remembered when he had deceived grandma. She was a lenient judge, and there had been no need; but it was quite impossible to tell her he was going to paint, not for their own good pleasure, but to get the house into a semblance of repair for the eye of

the man who might return to buy it. Gran'ther still felt guilty as he toiled along to Melcher's store; but he was old enough to have learned that while time passes a great many things happen to make it easier to meet what may come, and that only the fool worries over what may never come at all. It looked a very ugly thing now to say to grandma, "Let's sell the house and separate and live with the children." But if he went to her with the promise of a good fat sum to back him, nobody knew what grandma might reply. She could have the money, all except enough to buy him one suit a year and feed his pipe. Now it seemed to him that the only thing he was ever to want was the feeling that he was in the midst of life once more, not lurking on the outskirts. Salt-water life was better, but fresh water would do.

When he came back with the paint, grandma had the dishes washed and the kitchen swept, and she stood at the door, a clean afternoon apron on, waiting for him with the impatience of a bride. Again he felt his treachery, and frowned at her.

"There! there!" he said, "you go in an' set down, can't ye? I dunno's I shall undertake anything, after all."

Grandma was conversant with many unformulated rules for managing men-folks. She went meekly in and got out the sitting-room table, and all that afternoon she stood there cutting out shirts. Even gran'ther, unobservant as he was, knew what an absorbing occupation that seems to be, with the billowing cloth on the floor and the pattern laid this way and that, to save an inch; but he never guessed how sharply grand-

ma's eyes followed him when his back was turned, or how accurately she could have charted every move.

For the first day there was little painting done. It proved to be a workman's folly to paint where the rain would trickle in and spoil the pretty surface, and gran'ther put by his brush and got out his tools and the lumber lying in the shed where it was piled when Dan, coming home for his yearly visit, had stored it because he had been called back before he found time to tackle the old house. So day by day gran'ther hammered and planed, and his legs seemed to grow more limber, or he thought of them less, and grandma heard him once or twice singing, in his booming voice, "The Mellow Horn" and "Lord Lovell He Came." At such times grandma's eyes would light, and she would nod her head smilingly, as if to the beneficent household fates that had brought about her heart's desire; and once or twice, hidden from him by the chimney jog, she had danced a few fantastic steps to his rumbling measures. There was a great deal of work to be done inside, but one day, after a no'theast storm, when the water had deluged a window in a malignant cataract, gran'ther decided the gutters might as well be tightened, and it was on the day it cleared that Martin came along and found him observing the house from the front and frowning over it.

"Goin' to shingle her?" Martin called, stopping to lean over the fence.

It was a strange sort of comfort to take up his familiar ways with gran'ther. It gave him a melancholy security that there were Cranes still in the world, though Adelaide had gone with her aunt to make a

visit, leaving the neat house closed and the garden-beds untended. Gran'ther was in a discouraged mood. His mind insisted on carrying him back fifteen years or more with running comments to the effect that, if he had done his patching earlier, he need not find it such a crisscross matter now.

"Plague take her!" said he. "I dunno's she's wuth it."

"If you git round to it," said Martin, with an outer indifference, "I'll give you a lift with your stagin'."

"Shingles are gone up," gran'ther asserted, with the air of delivering a knock-out blow.

"So's everything in the way o' lumber," Martin countered. "If you're goin' to shingle at all, you better do it now or else forever after hold your peace. I don't expect to be able to build a gunnin' float myself. I've swore off matches an' toothpicks. Lumber's higher'n ninety, an' it's goin' to be higher if every tomfool's allowed to keep cuttin' off the wood."

So, in a few days, after gran'ther had ruminated and smoked and examined the bank book and been very cross indeed, and grandma had answered him meekly and taken her dancing steps in the next room because they had to be so private, the staging went up, and Martin came to shingle by odd jobs, still in the melancholy certainty that there was virtue in being near, though Adelaide was forever lost. Then came a carnival of painting, and gran'ther, carried away by the dash and abandon of it, painted everything he could lay his hands on, even the cupboard shelves which grandma was cheerfully willing to veil with scalloped papers. But she dared not curb his zeal, and on the



day when the shelves were dry and she was putting back the china, she saw him painting old Rover's kennel in the yard. Rover had been dead for many years, and his kennel would long ago have been split up for firewood if gran'ther had not been too backward to essay the task. Grandma saw it whitening before her gaze, and nodded smilingly and old Rover seemed back again, ready to put his nose in her lap and look up at her with a wrinkled forehead and confiding eyes.

It was on this day, when the last brushful of paint had been devoted to the kennel, that things began to happen. Lote Mendall came down and talked with gran'ther a long time at the gate. It was the cool of the afternoon, when the boats were coming in on a full tide; but the two men stood with their backs to the bay, colloquing earnestly instead of turning to the moving panorama of the water, as idlers were wont to do at that hour, remarking upon the boats as women, in a gay promenade, might talk of clothes. It was alarming to grandma, who watched them from behind the blind. It almost seemed as if nothing but bad news would tempt gran'ther to stand so thoughtfully, while the other man set forth his point of view. She could hardly wait until gran'ther got in.

"What's he want?" she queried tremblingly.

Gran'ther opened the brick-oven door and took out the box of cigars Dan had sent him. He selected one with great care, as if cigars might prove strikingly unlike, and lighted it, while grandma trembled. The cigars, she knew, were kept for great occasions.

"Well," said gran'ther between his puffs, "Mendall come down along to see —" Then he sat down in the

big chintz chair by the window and shut his eyes and stretched his legs out and puffed again.

“O my soul!” said grandma.

But she resolutely sat down and took her knitting, lest, if she hurried him, she should hear no more. It was surprising what things grandma knew about men, and what patience she had in putting them into practice.

“Mendall wants his house kinder tinkered up, an’ a mite o’ paint laid on,” said gran’ther.

He was almost purring through the smoke.

“Well, there’s plenty o’ j’iners he can git,” said grandma, who knew the outcome now, but chose to lead him gently on. Gran’ther was always best pleased to hear her a step behind.

“Says he won’t have one of ’em on the place. Says he wants somebody to putter an’ take as much time as it needs. Says mebbe there’ll be some work on the bo’ts down to the wharf.”

Grandma forgot her rules of action and flurried in.

“Why, mercy sakes! You couldn’t ever build a bo’t.”

“So I says to him. But he says, ‘You can tinker ’em up same as you used to yourn, an’ you can paint ’em. An’ I ain’t certain but what you can put a name on, too, as slick as a whistle.’ An’ by thunder!” said gran’ther — he took his cigar out of his mouth and glowered at her through the smoke, not because she had challenged him, but from the earnestness of his thought — “I dunno but I can. A man that can sail a bo’t can build her, an’ he can paint her, anyhow.”

This was a proposition grandma, not being the slave

of her emotions, could not justify, but she glowed and nodded at him. If he had told her he could turn back the tide or paint a rainbow she would have understood. It was because he felt youth in him, and she murmured to herself:

“Good for you!”

“What?” said gran’ther; but she added mildly:

“Well, I guess folks can do ’most anything they’ve a mind to.”

“I dunno but I shall sail a bo’t yet,” gran’ther said, not to her, but to his cigar. “My legs don’t feel the same, somehow. Why, Adelaide, that you?”

It was Adelaide at the door, in the dark blue linen suit she had worn in the train. She looked handsome and sweet. She had been up among the hills where Cousin Pratt lived, and the air had done her good.

“I thought I’d come right down and see how you were,” she said after she had given grandma a kiss and let gran’ther pinch her cheek and tell her she was ’most fat enough to kill. “My, don’t you look nice!”

Grandma gave her a three-cornered glance of pride and secrecy and feminine understanding. It said that gran’ther was to be praised enough, so that he should be incited to new efforts, but not too much, lest he should strike work and never do another stroke. But Adelaide was too amazed for full discretion.

“How ever in the world —” she said.

There she stopped, and gran’ther grinned at her.

“How’d she make me do it?” he inquired. He knew he need never tell exactly why, but that the end would justify him. “Well, I kinder thought I would. There’s Martin. He come with you?”

Adelaide's cheeks were fiery red now, and she held her head high.

"No," she said firmly. "I just stopped at the house a minute to leave auntie and then I came down to see how you were. I guess I'll be going. Mercy! if you ain't painted Rover's kennel. I'm going out that way, grandma, to see how it looks. Coming with me?"

So she and grandma went out at the back door, while Martin came up the front path and gran'ther met him.

"There's a chap down the road a piece that says he wants to see you," said Martin. "His tire's busted, and he's helpin' the man fix it up, but he wants you should go down and see him a minute. Says he's goin' to buy the place."

Gran'ther looked out at the water, not alive now with boats, but as if it lay there for beauty only, with the sky painted in it and a few whitecaps coming. He seemed to be thinking; but they were pleasant thoughts, for he smiled a little.

"Yes," he said, "I might as well see him."

"Who's that out by the kennel?"

Martin had grown paler, and gran'ther noticed it, and wondered if such light-complected people were ever so rugged as folks that took on tan.

"Why, that's Adelaide," he answered. "Didn't you know she'd come? Well, if I'm goin' to see that feller I might as well do it."

So he went out of the yard, and Martin, without another look at Adelaide, had followed him. But Adelaide's eyes were on him, and her heart, she thought, stopped beating. She wished it might stop for good and all.

"So that's the way it was," grandma was finishing. "When he got round to it he jest set to an' done it. That's jest like men-folks, for all the world. You can thorn 'em an' thorn 'em an' they won't move so much as a hair either for'ard or back, but when the time comes they'll start out as budge as you please, an' do what you've asked 'em to. Why, father, what is it?"

Gran'ther Crane was walking past them to the garden, where he meant to select a long, thin cucumber for his supper. He had only one cane now.

"Property's goin' up," he remarked.

"We had a chance to sell the place," grandma was explaining to Adelaide. She smiled over it, as if it were a foolish fantasy.

"He's been back," said gran'ther. "He's up the road a piece now."

"You don't say!" said grandma. "He ain't asked you if you'd sell?"

"Yes, he has."

"What'd you tell him?"

"Said I was born here an' I'd lived here an' here I'm goin' to die."

Grandma nodded.

"Of all the impidence!" she breathed. "'Out o' repair!' An' 'Do the skeeters trouble us?' Well, our skeeters won't trouble him. Why, you goin', child?"

Adelaide had to go because she felt she might begin to cry. So she hurried across the yard and along the path, not looking up, but down at her blue skirt, and there at the gate Martin was waiting for her. He

spoke as he used to after evening meeting when they began to go together:

“May I see you home?”

Adelaide could not answer, but they walked along quite slowly.

“Say, Addie,” he was asking, “don’t you think you’ve treated me pretty bad?”

She answered in a small voice: “I guess I have.”

Then they walked a pace or two further, and Martin said in a softened tone:

“Your gran’ther’s house looks pretty nice, don’t you think so?”

“Real nice,” said Adelaide.

“Don’t it kind o’ make you wish you had a house o’ your own?”

“Yes,” said Adelaide, “it does.”

## THE PATH OF STARS

WHEN Marietta Cole came home, on a crisp winter evening, from the meeting-house where the minister's wife had been giving a talk on "My Week in Italy," she found her husband asleep. He was a picture of contentment there by the stove, legs stretched out, hands folded across his waistcoat, his mouth slightly open, and beside him, on the table, symbols of relinquished joys in pipe and county *Star*. He was a thin man, with a withered, dust-colored face and a baldness that continued his wrinkled forehead, somewhat to its advantage, over the slope of a shining head. Marietta, who was thin, and "quick as lightning," the neighbors avowed, with a startled-looking, sanguine face, sparsely freckled, and vital yellow hair drawn straight back and tightly knotted, had never found cause to complain of 'Liphalet's looks; but to-night, as she stood there gazing absently at him and unwinding her cloud, she wished something was different. Whether or not it was he she did not know. 'Liphalet drew in his feet with a slow, luxurious stiffness, pulled himself up in his chair, and, shutting his mouth definitively, seemed to return once more to masculine ease in his own relation to things.

"I 'most wisht you'd gone," said Marietta.

She had not folded her shawl and cloud according to her scrupulous wont, but swept them from her to

the lounge, as if she could hardly stop for order in so interesting a world.

"Come round here an' git warm," said 'Liphalet. "I'll put in another stick an' open the oven door."

She shook her head and sat down in the rocking-chair near the window. The curtain was up, and in the moonlight she could see a shining crust of snow. As she rocked and talked, she gazed at it absently. It seemed, for the first time, to cover a world beyond the ten or fifteen miles she knew. There might be paths in it running everywhere, and the thought of them moved her.

"'Liphalet," she said, unprepared herself for what the words were to be, "I want to go som'er's."

"Where ye want to go?" he asked, with but mild interest.

He rose and stretched himself yawningly. It was time to wind the clock.

"I dunno," said Marietta vaguely. "If I had my choice I dunno's I could tell. It's terrible pretty over there in Italy."

"Now what makes you think you know that," said 'Liphalet, to the accompaniment of the crackling wind of the clock, "hearin' a woman talk about it one evenin' so? I guess she set it out for all 'twas wuth."

"There was pictures," said Marietta softly. She was clasping her knees and bending forward, her delicate chin protruded. "There's churches — an' there's towers."

"Well, well," said 'Liphalet, "it's crawlin' on to 'most half arter ten. We better git to bed."

But Marietta had risen and, with a darting haste,



knelt before the corner cupboard. On the lower shelf was a pile of books, tightly covered with a cloth. The bottom one she pulled out carefully, and, bringing it to the table, bent over it with a frowning brow. It was a geography, dog-eared and worn, the covers scarcely showing their tracery of continents. Marietta whirled the leaves rapidly and settled upon a page.

"Here's Italy," she breathed. "Let's see what it says." But it said nothing to verify her hopes. "Productions," she read. "Population. No, there ain't any of it here."

"There, I told ye so," said 'Liphalet. He had gone to the sink and taken a fortifying draught from the dipper. "I told ye she set it out." He returned to the table and stood regarding, not her, but the book. A shade came over his face, and he spoke with a grave hesitancy, "Wa'n't that Warren's jogaphry?"

Marietta closed the book and also stood looking at it, the light of anticipation wiped out of her face.

"Yes," said she.

"I 'most wish—" said 'Liphalet. There he paused, because he had been about to add, "I wish Warren hadn't died"; but that seemed to him perhaps unnecessarily emotional, and he nipped it before conclusion.

Marietta understood. She closed the book and returned with it to the cupboard, slipped it into its place, and spread the cover with her air of performing a gentle rite.

"'Twas fifteen year ago come March," said she.

Then she shut the door upon her relics and came back to the table. Father and mother, their hearts at one

in the aching consciousness of old bereavement, they stood there letting their minds throb back upon the past.

"Well, well," said 'Liphalet. He did not even sigh, only turned away to put in another hard-wood stick to keep the room warm for morning.

But Marietta had more to tell. Italy had pushed it temporarily aside, but now it took its way.

"I don't see what possesses folks that have got children not to realize what 'tis. There's your brother Enoch. Do you know what's he done to Jessie?"

"Jessie?" repeated 'Liphalet, turning, stove-cover in hand. "What's he done to her?"

"Why, it ain't so much what he's done; it's what he ain't done. He won't give her a new dress for nice, an' there she was this evenin' settin' in her shawl, an' 'most died o' heat. I see her when we come out. 'Jessie,' says I, 'you'll git your death all bundled up as you be, an' then comin' out into the cold.'"

"Well," said 'Liphalet, in a puzzle, "what's she do it for?"

"Why, she hadn't a thing to wear but that old plaid I give her three years ago, an' then 'twas rotten as a pear. Busted right acrost the shoulder seams it has, an' when she showed it to him, says he, 'Can't ye take a run along there, or hem it or suthin', an' put on a mite o' braid?' Jessie told me that with her own lips."

"Well," said 'Liphalet, "'twouldn't ha' been so if her mother 'd lived. He's runnin' pretty nigh the wind. He's goin' to build him a new barn come spring, an' that 'll take all he wants to put into it. Jessie better

git along with things as they be, an' if she outlives him she never 'll have to put her hands into water."

"Outlive him!" flashed Marietta. "Why, your brother Enoch's likely to live twenty years at the least, an' here's all the other girls with their camel's-hair, an' some of 'em with furs. An' there's Elbridge Morse settin' side o' Rosy Ann Blake all the evenin', an' she with cologne on her handkercher, an' when 'twas over he see her home. I could ha' cried. Jessie come along with me, an' part o' the time I guess she *was* cryin'. 'Peared that way to me."

"Well," said 'Liphalet, untouched in an argument he held to be irrefutable, "if he's that kind of a feller, let him go. She's well rid of him."

"What kind of a feller?" inquired Marietta, in some scorn of dismissing so large a subject with a truism.

"A feller that thinks about clo'es an' the like o' that."

"He don't know it's clo'es," said Marietta, "nor cologne neither. What makes all the birds feathered out bright in the spring?"

"Why, I dunno," replied 'Liphalet. He was standing with the bedroom lamp in his hand, and he looked at her agape. "What's the birds got to do with it?"

Marietta put on her inscrutable face, the one that meant she saw it was of no use to go any farther on that tack.

"Oh, I kinder thought on't," said she. "I read suthin' about it t'other day."

Then she shut her lips with the look her husband knew.

But 'Liphalet thought he dreamed in the middle of

the night that he heard her voice asking clearly, "Shouldn't you s'pose my butter-money would take me as fur as Italy?" He was certainly awake the next minute, and he was on the point of asking Marietta if she had spoken; but she was so still he knew he had really dreamed it, after all.

The next morning, when Marietta was alone, doing her dishes, Jessie came in, breathing fast with the haste of her running through the cold. She was a slender girl with bright-colored hair and an eager face, shy, it was easy to see, and yet with quick, cozy ways when she was encouraged. Though there was no kinship between them, she had a fleeting resemblance to Marietta. You could not put your hand on it, but it was there. Perhaps it was because they loved and hated the same things. Jessie took a towel and at once began to wipe the dishes.

"Don't you concern yourself with that," said Marietta, pouring a libation of hottest water on them. "You've got enough to do at home."

"He's gone to the street," said Jessie, wiping with deft precision. Then she added, in tardy recognition of the vague, ungracious pronoun, "father has."

Marietta was rattling pans in and out of her rinsing-water.

"Did you ever in all your life hear anything so great as that lecture was last night?" she asked. "I couldn't git a wink o' sleep till after two."

"I didn't think much about it," said Jessie drearily. "Maybe I didn't listen very hard."

The color had faded from her cheeks. Her mouth drooped forlornly.

"Mercy sakes! I dunno how anybody could help listenin'," said Marietta. "I should ha' had to stop my ears with cotton-wool." Then she remembered the tragedy of the inadequate costume and its covering, and added kindly, "Well, mebbe you was too hot."

"I don't know whether I was hot or whether I was cold," said Jessie. Her eyes had the look of seeing far-away things she dreaded, and wondering whether they would really come. "Elbridge went by this mornin'."

"Did he? Well, there," said Marietta, in a passion of sympathy. "He stop?"

"No. He had Rosy Ann Blake with him."

"They goin' to the street?"

"I dunno. I guess maybe they're goin' to ride."

For a moment they worked in a swift, silent unison, and then Marietta said violently:

"Well, you hold up your head, Jessie Cole. That's what you do."

"But 'twouldn't make the leastest difference whether he asked me or whether he didn't," said Jessie, in a monotone of confidence chiefly to herself. "I ain't got any hat an' nothin' but that old shawl."

"Well, you hold up your head," counseled Marietta. "You're young, anyways — young an' strong. If you were as old as I be, you might well think 'twas good-night all."

"Why, you ain't old, Aunt Marietta," said Jessie, surprised out of her brooding. "You're as spry as a cat. I never should think of such a thing in the world."

"Well," said Marietta good-humoredly, "I sha'n't

see fifty ag'in, nor yet sixty. I guess if I told you what I was goin' to do you'd think I need to be spryer'n I be now."

"What is it?" asked Jessie, with but a mild curiosity.

"I'm thinkin' o' takin' my butter-money an' my quilt-money an' my two shares Uncle Freeman left me, an' I'm goin' to Italy."

So wild a vision was terrifying to the girl. It snatched her from her brooding with a ruthless hand.

"Why, I never heard o' such a thing," she breathed. "Who you goin' with?"

"Oh, I dunno," said Marietta carelessly. Yet her eyes shone and her color was high. "I guess there'll be folks enough on the boat so's I sha'n't git lonesome."

"What's Uncle 'Liphalet say?"

"I ain't told him."

Jessie thought she detected a momentary sagging of high courage here, and she felt no wonder at it.

"But what's it for, Aunt Marietta?" she persisted. "What you goin' for?"

"I've got to go som'er's," Marietta declared. She had hung up her dishpan, and now she stood, her back to the sink, as if she repudiated it. "I knew there was somethin' the matter o' me, but till last night I never see what 'twas. I've got to go."

"Seems if Italy was good ways off," said Jessie.

Marietta's eyes sparkled.

"I guess it's the furthest there is," she declared. "Sounded so, anyway. Further the better. I've got to go." 'Liphalet's step came heavily, with a meas-

ured assurance, through the shed. "Don't you tell," said Marietta.

Her eyes glittered now, and Jessie shrank from their strange luster.

"I guess I won't," said she.

That evening Marietta and her husband settled to their occupations, he with the unfinished paper before him and she with squares of patchwork. But in her lap lay a little book she had found that day in a wild incursion upon the attic. Physical Geography it was called. She thought it might throw some new light.

"What quilt you on now?" asked 'Liphalet. "How many's this sence June?"

"Five," said Marietta.

She steadied the book on her knee. 'Liphalet leaned back in his chair and dallied with the luxurious sense of an evening to be warm in and two columns of the paper yet to read.

"Seems if you was possessed to make quilts," he remarked.

"I kinder like to," said Marietta absently. "There's so many figgers you can plan. Some I've made up."

But now began a queer, intermittent cannonading. 'Liphalet sprang to his feet.

"What do you think 'tis?" asked Marietta.

He was lighting the lantern as he spoke.

"Old Kit's got cast."

He was gone, leaving the door open in his haste, and Marietta threw her shawl over her shoulders and followed him. But midway in the slippery path she turned her ankle and fell, in a foolish, awkward way that twisted her so that she could not for the moment

rise. So she lay there and laughed and looked up at the heavens; but presently she became sober and looked again. And then, when the cannonading began once more, she felt it like a recall, and rolled over and got on her feet. When she reached the barn, Kit was up, and the other horses were stretching curious noses and 'Liphalet had given her a consolatory measure of oats out of the bin.

"'Twon't do for her to do that many times more," said 'Liphalet, on the way back to the house. "Mebbe I'll build her a box-stall she can turn round in an' git her bearin's."

Marietta had a hand on his arm.

"'Liphalet, you stop a minute," said she. He wondered what made her breathe so fast. "Did you know," said Marietta, "the stars was all in patterns?"

'Liphalet instinctively held up his lantern, as if thereby he could find them better; but Marietta imperatively pulled it down.

"You look," said she. "Cast back your head an' look at 'em. They're in patterns, 'Liphalet. Did you ever think o' that afore?"

"Why," said 'Liphalet ponderously, "there's the Dipper. Everybody knows that. Then there's the Milky Way."

"Why, don't you see that kind of a square up there?" said Marietta breathlessly. "An' there's two, right in line, looks as if they belonged together. An' them little crowded ones off behind the shed, jest on the pick. 'Liphalet, I guess I'm a fool, but never so long's I'm a livin' woman did I see the stars as I've seen 'em this night."



"There, there," said 'Liphalet kindly. "You'll git cold stan'in' out here, nothin' on your head."

He began his plodding way to the house, and Marietta followed. But when they were once inside the kitchen she took the lantern from him.

"You le' me have it," said she. "I've got to go back. Yes, yes, I'll put suthin' on my head. I'll git me a pencil an' paper fust."

"What ye want of a pencil an' paper?" 'Liphalet inquired.

He was busy fitting in a stick of wood. His idea of winter comfort was a stove hot enough to scorch you off to sleep. Marietta was searching in the desk.

"There, I got it," said she. "I'll take this sheet you tried your pen on. Don't you set up. I dunno when I shall be back."

'Liphalet turned his wondering gaze upon her.

"Where you goin' to this time o' night?" he inquired.

"Nowheres. I'm goin' to see if I can't git some kind of an idea about them stars."

For a moment 'Liphalet stood frowning out his perplexity. Then he walked to the east window and put his face to the pane. There was the lantern irradiating the gloom. It seemed to him it might, from the direction, be on the corn-house steps, and in a moment he saw Marietta seat herself on the step below it. After that the lantern did not move, and 'Liphalet, his eyes upon it to the exhaustion of patience, got his hat again and went out. There she sat, as he had guessed, but very busy, too busy to notice him. A book was on her knees and a sheet of paper on the book, and Mari-

etta was alternately looking at the stars and setting down random dots.

"Come, come," said 'Liphalet, "you'll git your death out here."

"You jest glance your eyes up," said Marietta. There was a thrill in her voice so that he hardly knew it. "Ain't that an elegant one? There's three startin' one way an' three t'other. Anything so handsome as that is ought to have a name."

"Why, they've got names," said 'Liphalet patiently. "They're the constellations. Don't you s'pose anybody ever glimpsed 'em afore to-night?"

"Yes, I know they be," said Marietta, working swiftly. "But *I* never see 'em afore, not jest this way. I guess I've looked at 'em every night o' my life when 'twa'n't cloudy. But I s'pose I thought they were jest set round hit or miss. But they ain't, 'Liphalet. They belong together. Ever you think o' that?"

"Well, well," said 'Liphalet, "you come in now an' think it over, 'fore you git your death."

But it was ten o'clock before she followed him, and then her eyes were shining and her paper was covered with dots.

"No," said Marietta. "Mercy, no. I ain't cold."

The next night it was the same, and the next. 'Liphalet spent his evenings alone, and his wife sat now upon the platform of the well and made her breathless diagrams. There Jessie, running over through the dark, found her, and, tingling as she was with news, delayed its sharing because Marietta, throned upon the platform with the lantern at her side and pencil and paper in her reddened hands, looked so queer a sight.

"For mercy sake, Aunt Marietta," cried Jessie, "what you doin' out here?"

Marietta was absorbed in her mysterious task.

"You run in," said she. "Tell your uncle I'll be along in a minute. I've got to git this one straight."

"What is it?" wondered Jessie. "What is't you're gettin' straight?"

"You look up there," Marietta commanded her. She was pointing with her pencil. "You see that little bunch o' stars all jammed together? Now, how many should you say there was, five or six?"

But Jessie squinted and craned her pretty neck and could not tell.

"Land!" said Marietta, "you ain't as fur-sighted as I be. Now you run in."

"I don't want to," said Jessie. Her voice was suddenly eager. "I'm glad I caught you here. Aunt Marietta, he only took Rosy Ann Blake over to the cars. Her aunt's got a lame back, an' they've sent for her."

"There!" said Marietta. "He tell you so?"

She had risen and stood with her hand upon the chair, ready to lift and carry it. Her feet were cold and her teeth chattered in spite of her. She knew 'Liphalet would say she had done enough star-gazing for one night.

"Yes, he told me," said Jessie happily. "He came over to see if father'd let him have the oxen a spell to-morrer, but he stayed an' talked. An' he let out she asked him to take her to the depot because their horse'd lost a shoe. I guess she hadn't lost any to hurt. I guess he thought so himself, maybe."

"Mebbe," said Marietta. "Men ain't such fools as we think they be. Trouble is, you can't tell what they see an' what they don't. What else'd he say?"

"He said one thing," said Jessie, "just as he was goin' out the door. He asked me if I knew Mis' Titcomb was goin' to have the sociable week from Wednesday."

"Well, you did, didn't you? 'Twas give out last Sunday same as usual."

"I didn't go last Sunday," said Jessie. Her light-some mood had fled. "I ain't goin' to meetin' again this winter, till I get somethin' to wear. I told father so."

"What'd he say?"

"He said, 'There's your mother's furs.' They're that old yellor fitch, Aunt Marietta. I s'pose I ought to set by 'em because they were mother's, but I don't an' I can't. There ain't a girl in the congregation that wouldn't laugh if she see me walkin' in under mother's furs."

"Well," said Marietta soberly — "well."

She stood quite still. She seemed even to have forgotten to be cold.

"That's all," said Jessie. "I thought I'd just come over an' tell you. Sometimes I think I'll wash an' iron my dotted muslin, an' wear it to the sociable. I s'pose I'd catch my death o' cold, but I shouldn't care for that. Only every single member there'd know I hadn't got anything else. Well, I dunno."

She walked off down the path, and Marietta, carrying the chair, made her way to the house. But before

Jessie had reached the gate, curiosity came again upon her, and she called:

"Aunt Marietta, what was you doin', settin' out there in the cold?"

Marietta did not answer. She was putting down her chair in the kitchen, where 'Liphalet had the stove red hot for her.

"You come here an' git your feet into the oven," he said fretfully. "You're enough to worry anybody to death. I never see such carryin's on."

"No," said Marietta absently, "I ain't cold."

She did draw up a chair and put out a hand to the reddening cover. But she kept her pencil and paper in the other hand.

'Liphalet had evidently charted the road of her enlightenment.

"Marietta," said he, "didn't you know folks had got the heavens all laid out 'fore you was born?"

"Oh, yes, I s'pose so," said Marietta. "Queer if they hadn't. Seems if there wa'n't anything on the earth they'd find equal to them doin's up there."

"It's called astronomy," said 'Liphalet impressively. He was really very anxious. "Them are the constellations. They've drawed 'em all out an' give names to 'em."

"Law! yes," said Marietta easily. "I s'pose they have. That don't hender my doin' it too, as I know of. I've divided the heavens into four parts now — no'th, east, south an' west. I should s'pose that was the best way, shouldn't you?"

She was regarding him with an anxiety of her own.

It had nothing to do with his, and 'Liphalet saw it. He could have groaned at her unreason.

"Marietta, don't you see," he essayed despairingly, "they're folks that have give all their time to it. They don't do nothin' else. It's the way they earn their livin'. Mebbe they couldn't run a farm, or the like o' that, same's I can; but I couldn't go into their business 'thout some practice. Nor you can't, neither. Marietta, don't you see?"

"Law!" said Marietta, with the utmost indulgence for his point of view, "that don't make no difference to me. I s'pose folks have drawn out maps of Italy an' wrote books an' told ye jest how to git there an' what ye'd see. But 'twould be all one to me if I was goin'. I guess I should use my eyes."

She settled down to her mending, and 'Liphalet gradually subsided into his usual condition of somnolent ease. But while he was winding the clock she flicked him again in her unconsidered fashion of forgetting that his was not the habit of quick response.

"'Liphalet," said she, "should you think 'twas all right for me to do what seemed best with my butter-money?"

'Liphalet did think so, but, with habitual caution where Marietta was concerned, he pondered whether she could be intending to use it to her own disadvantage. He saw no possibility of lavishing it on the starry heavens, though the present complexion of things looked that way. But Marietta was hardly waiting a response.

"It's rolled up quite a lot," said she. "You know I've saved it for 'most five years, an' there's the twelve

dollars I got when I sold that batch o' quilts. What possesses anybody to give so much for a mess o' patch-work quilts beats me. Anybody can make 'em if they jest set down to't."

She had forgotten all about the unanswered question and he found it just as well. Emphatic as 'Liphalet might be in his restraint of Marietta's longings, he had at heart a sense of his own futility. One more question she had to put that night, and this he need not answer, chiefly because the certainty lay too deep in both their hearts.

"'Liphalet, if Warren had lived, I guess we should ha' let him have everything he wanted, don't you? Everything 'twas right. An' have it while he's young."

The next day was a sparkling one, with the snow blue in the hollows and diamond-bright in the sun, and just enough warmth to melt the icicles on the roof, so that they went pleasantly drip, drip. At two o'clock Marietta with old Kit and the sleigh drew up at brother Enoch's door and called to Jessie. The girl came at once, hot and worried, for she had been trying to set her mother's rusty velvet ribbon on a dress for which there was no hope.

"You git on your things," said Marietta, "an' jump in 'long o' me. I'm goin' to the street."

"I ain't got any things," said Jessie daringly. She knew her father was shaving at the kitchen glass, and with Marietta to give her courage she hoped he might hear her and trembled lest he should. "I ain't goin' to wear that old shawl, if I don't git out all winter."

"Come quick," said Marietta. "I can't stop to talk. I've got to git some clo'es, an' you can't tell nothin'

about colors less'n you see 'em by daylight. Do you up warm. Here's a nice hot soapstone for our feet."

Jessie looked at the sparkling day, and the young heart in her cried out to her to use and spend it. She whirled back into the kitchen, where Enoch, white with lather, stood scraping a distended cheek. He was a dull-colored man like 'Liphalet, with a heavier build and a more masterful line of face.

"Where you goin'?" he asked.

Jessie thought he had heard where she was going. This was the preamble to what his mind, with a wrench, had brought itself to do. That Jessie should hate her clothes he could endure. It seemed an unintelligible condition of youth and mysterious girlhood. But that she should refuse to meet the eyes of the street in them argued a strength of feeling he must mollify. He was a practical man, and, being disquieted, he sought a remedy.

"Here," said he. He brought out his worn wallet and ponderously selected from it. Jessie stood with her eyes dancing, an unbelieving smile upon her lips.

"Here's five dollars," said Enoch Cole. "You git me a clay pipe, an' you can put the rest on't into suthin' you want."

Jessie always remembered that day as the one "when I bought my blue cashmere." Somehow she found herself in the sleigh, not needing the soapstone at all because she was so warm with tingling life, and she was saying over and over again to Marietta:

"Father give me five dollars. Only think, he give me a five dollar bill!"



Marietta had her own opinion of the proportion of the sum, but she contented herself by commenting:

“There! Now you see.”

And by the time they reached the street, Jessie had rejoiced herself into the likelihood that Enoch was a passably good father, after all. It was only when they had actually stopped at the drygoods store that Marietta told her purpose. She was blanketing old Kit and punctuating her speech with tugs and frowning asides about the chill of horses’ legs where the blanket doesn’t serve.

“Now, Jessie, you’re goin’ to pick out two dresses — I kinder wish you’d pitch upon a blue — an’ a hat an’ an outside garment pretty as we can find.”

“Why, Aunt Marietta!” said Jessie. “Why, Aunt Marietta!”

She had grown quite pale, and she stood still on the sidewalk and let Aunt Marietta give the last endearing touches to old Kit. Marietta turned and read the story of her face, all youth that hoped again, all ecstasy at the unknown that might be. Marietta, too, looked a little pale. Then she touched Jessie’s hand and they went in together.

“You see,” said Marietta, as they neared the counter, “your uncle an’ me were kinder talkin’ things over last night, an’ what we both think is, if Warren had lived we should ha’ wanted him to have things folks crave when they’re young. We ain’t got nobody but ourselves, an’ what ye want ye want, an’ that’s all there is to it.”

To Jessie it was a delirium of happiness, this calling

down beautiful colors from the shelves to wonder which was prettiest and most becoming: never most useful, but most becoming. And by chance Elbridge Morse walked in to buy handkerchiefs, and he looked curiously at her scarlet cheeks and the light in her eyes, for she was not the same girl that had been going to meeting in the old brown shawl. And when she tucked a little golden wisp behind her ear, his gaze dwelt amazedly upon the shimmer of the hair she smoothed. He looked startled, as if he had forgotten how pretty Jessie Cole could be and something in her renewed bloom and gayety had reminded him. Marietta laughed a little to herself and moved off down the counter to look at plaid shirtings; but when Elbridge remembered he hadn't hitched his horse and plunged out to catch him, walking down the street, Marietta came back to Jessie, and again they immersed themselves in color. There were a few other errands to be done, but at the last of them Jessie sat in the sleigh and held old Kit. She had a great many things to think about.

"There," said Marietta, "I b'lieve that's all. You keep that so's 'twon't git crumpled. It's some big writin'-paper — I guess they have it to draw on — biggest I could git."

Through the drive home they were both rather silent. Jessie was sitting with the roll of paper in her hand, thinking the vague, ecstatic thoughts of youth. But Marietta was looking at the sky from time to time, and smiling, a knowing little smile, because she had decided the few clouds in the west would be gone when the sun went down and leave the evening clear. They were nearly home when the realities of things rushed back

upon Jessie and for the moment dimmed her dream. She turned upon Marietta and gasped with the trouble of her thought.

“O Aunt Marietta,” said she, “was that your butter-money?”

Marietta gave Kit a flick, and the horse’s heels cast back a little frozen shower.

“That was your money,” Jessie went on, with increasing trouble. “Your own money. You said you was goin’ to Italy.”

Marietta smiled broadly. She seemed to have a merry secret with herself, a most exciting one.

“Italy?” said she. “Italy? I couldn’t go to Italy. I ain’t got time. Why, there’s more’n I could do up there”—she pointed with her whip, and Jessie’s eyes followed uncomprehendingly, seeing only the western clouds —“if I should live a thousand million years. No, I ain’t got time for Italy this v’y’ge.”

## THE WIDOW'S THIRD

**J**ONATHAN PICKERING, driving into the yard after a day's mowing in the marsh, where he had carried his dinner, glanced up at the kitchen windows and wondered if Lydia were at home. There was perhaps a little imperious surprise in his look when the silence and blank vistas made it apparent that she was not. For she always appeared at some point for a glance at him, on his return from work or market, and her husband accepted that readiness as the appeasing of her natural anxiety over the absence of a possession so valued as he. Lydia, with her quiet, almost timid ways, even after ten years of married life, was very necessary and dear to him; but he had fallen in with her impulsive fervor of service, so that now they both had a magnified sense that he was the head of the house and more also. The men he dealt with found him a little overweening, and wives who heard him command Lydia to "get her things" on a grange evening, when gayety was in full swing and her pink cheeks were flushed to a lovelier rose, shrewdly shared the opinion that he would be the better if Lydia took him down a peg. But this was not Lydia's way. It would have called for a dear cause indeed to toughen her fiber against what she loved.

As he was leading the horse into the barn, he saw

her. She was hurrying up the lane from the lower pasture, her little flying figure almost obscured by the load she carried — flowers, green branches and trailing clematis. Pickering frowned slightly as he saw what she had been doing. She was possessed, he knew, to tramp the woods and rob their splendors to bring home for multitudinous vases made of bottles and old cans. Yet she had two garden beds under the front windows, warm with bloom from the bravery of bleeding-heart to balm and dahlias. He wondered they did not suffice her, without these side excursions to traffic in mere weeds. He had a good deal to do about the barn and he did not see her until the chores were over and he went in to supper. She had been effectively busy — the neighbors said she moved like a dart — and the kitchen had its vivifying fragrance of the coffee he extravagantly loved, touched up delightfully by the tang of ham and eggs. Lydia by the stove, a slight girlish body with pathetic brows and keen eyes under them, glanced up at him as he came in, with the wistful look of the creature that adores its master, but having no encouragement to communicate its special theories about him, has to wait for recognition. Jonathan Pickering was tall and brown, with an aquiline cast of profile. He was clean-shaven and fastidiously neat by habit, and Lydia's heart delighted in him. But she waited even to smile until his greeting gave her leave. He began pumping into the basin.

“Well,” said he, putting work aside with the word.

Then she did smile, though only at his back, and felt at once that ridiculous impulse — she knew it was ridiculous because she almost always came out of it, if

she had followed it, feeling rather silly — to tell him all about the day. There was one thing, however, she had to tell. When he had appeased the first tang of appetite, she felt the propitious time had come.

“ You have some more coffee? ” she asked him, and he passed his cup.

Her voice recalled him from his hungry satisfactions, and he glanced at her, receiving back the cup. Lydia was perhaps not a pretty woman, but she looked bright and eager enough to arrest the gaze, and the stimulation the day had given her spoke eloquently from her eyes.

“ Where you been? ” Jonathan inquired.

That was her opening. She quite forgot her plate.

“ Down to the lower pastur’,” she answered instantly. “ I found that yeller flower there where I come on it last summer, the one with the lily-o’-the-valley leaves. And then I crossed the swamp and went over Marden’s High Ridge, and, Jonathan, what you s’pose I see there? ”

Jonathan gave a neutral sound combined of satisfaction in coffee of the right strength and a willingness that she should proceed before he had to answer.

“ Well! ” Her eyes shone blacker, and now she pushed her plate aside. “ Jonathan, what do you s’pose Silas Marden’s been and done to his High Ridge? ”

Jonathan was at last concerned. His pasture abutted on Marden’s, and Marden’s act might well affect him.

“ Marden ain’t took down his fences? ” he volunteered.

"No, no, I guess he ain't. It's somethin' worse'n that."

"Well, why don't you tell?" said Jonathan testily.

What there could be more heinous than interfering with the boundaries of land he did not know, unless it might be running the critters home from pasture so that they refused to give down their milk. But Lydia was not waiting for a climax. She was ready to tell, and her eyes grew even bigger with the import of it. Jonathan, finding them fixed upon him, had to meet them, and they gave him, in spite of himself, an anxious qualm.

"He's been and let them put up a painted sign, higher'n I can reach, of that awful Mixwell Flour. It's right on the top o' the Ridge."

Jonathan descended from the pinnacle of anxiety. Evidently the question was not going to affect him.

"I dunno what you've got ag'inst that flour," he mused. "I got ye a bag when Tilden praised it up to the nines, and you said 'twas the best you ever cooked with. And then, first thing I knew, you'd turned ag'inst it."

"I guess I did turn ag'inst it, minute I see how they was advertisin' it. You couldn't go a mile from home without seein' it, in the sightliest places, too. They'd put up a great board on the big elm along by Shady Rill, and there was three down on the ma'sh road where the water's so blue, come spring. There's nothin' they wouldn't spoil, if they had their way, and all to sell a barrel o' flour. Mixwell Flour! I'd starve 'fore I'd cook with it or eat it either, and I don't care what you say."

"Well, well!" said Jonathan.

He helped himself to a piece of custard-pie.

"And there 'tis, right where folks can see it from both roads, no matter which way they come —"

"Course it's where folks can see it," said Jonathan, with his accustomed forbearance toward the feminine mind. "That's what ye advertise *for* — to ketch folks' eyes."

But Lydia was not listening. She evidently had a sorrowful thought of her own.

"They put it up terrible strong," she mused regretfully. "It's higher'n I be, too. I kicked and kicked, and I couldn't do more'n get off the lower end o' the boards."

Jonathan stared at her, the outraged instinct of the property-holder in his gaze.

"You don't mean to tell me you been interferin' with anything in Marden's pastur'?" he challenged her.

But Lydia met his look quite innocently.

"Course I did," she said. "I wouldn't have such a thing round. That time I went to Aunt Sabra's by the ma'sh road, I took a hatchet with me, and I knocked off quite a few boards. But to-day I didn't have no hatchet. I didn't know what I should find."

"You don't mean to say," pursued Jonathan, as if the next disclosure might find him gasping, "that was the time you drove into the ma'sh most up to the ex'— and got yourself all over ma'sh mud?"

"Yes," said Lydia. "Course that's what I done it for."

"I asked you what you's in the ma'sh for anyways, and you said 'twas because you was crossin' it."



"Well, I was," said Lydia, "but I was crossin' it to knock down them signs."

She had risen, and now she began to pile the dishes, and Jonathan, watching her deft motions, speculated dumbly on the queerness of womankind when it escapes from the kitchen to uncharted fields: the peril, too. Lydia was, he reflected, as gentle as a lamb, but take her on the ground where men were disfiguring the face of nature and she might do irreparable deeds. He, too, rose and got his pipe. But when he had filled it and was on his way to the bench at the back door where he liked to take his smoke, he paused. Lydia, he knew, would have to be admonished. If she didn't know where to draw her lines, she had him to tell her.

"Look here," said he, and Lydia set down her pile of plates and came quickly, like a child called to some inevitable task. She looked up at him with trustful eyes full of the admiration Jonathan had for daily sustenance.

"Look here," said he. "You can't go round interferin' with other folks' property. If anybody's put a sign up on Marden's land, that's his business. 'Tain't yourn. If you go round carryin' hatchets and knockin' down folks' signs, you'll be took up, and I dunno but you'll go to jail. Now mind what I say." At the door he paused for a final admonishing. "I'm goin' over that way to-morrer, and I'll take a few nails along and nail them boards on. It's well nobody see you carryin' on so. Now, you mind."

Then he went away to his smoke, and having settled the matter, dismissed it from his thought. But Lydia did not go at once about her work. She stood immov-

able where he had left her, and her small face had the look of one who is considering very hard.

This was the day before the one Jonathan always remembered as the time he discovered that there was something the matter with his heart. For a long time it had been troubling him, he saw now, for after almost every meal he had a recurrence of what he hardly dared think of yet as palpitations, and having a strong sense that Lydia was a creature of childlike mind who must not be troubled, he had fallen into the habit of going up into the barn chamber, to lie down on the old lounge there and get it over. But it was hardly of any use to get it over, for after the next meal there it was again. And then Marden stopped on his way to the street, and having brought the news of Abel Whitcomb's death, added tersely:

"Heart disease. Had palpitations for over a year. And hasn't left his widdler a cent she can get at — nothin' but that farm and nobody to run it."

Marden drove away and Jonathan sat down on the chopping-block to think it over. He chose the chopping-block because it hardly seemed possible to get into the house without resting midway. He sat there and faced his doom. Whitcomb had died in a year. Perhaps he should die in less. And Lydia would have the farm and some ready money, though not enough, he knew, to keep her comfortable for what might be her lifetime. She was younger than he, too, and now he was sorry for it. He hardly knew how to take the unproven journey without Lydia beside him, and it seemed brutal to leave her in a world where there would

be nobody to split the wood and keep her from doing foolish things.

Lydia was away that afternoon, in the swamp after thoroughwort. She made ostensible errands like this whenever she wanted to escape to the wilds, and even Jonathan knew they were only pretexts. He had found her one day in the swamp, before he had grown secure about her ability to take care of herself, and her shoes and stockings were on dry land while she waded and gathered blue flag and sang in a wild, high voice. Jonathan never heard her sing in that way at home or even in church, though he knew her voice was true and sweet. And this day she had seemed beside herself with some emotion he felt to be peculiar to her and solemnly accorded her: for when she saw him and came out of the swamp, cheeks scarlet and eyes shining, she was not at all confused at having been caught in so mad a silliness. She only told him how lovely it was to feel the black swamp mud, hot at the surface where the sun soaked it and cold below, and how it "squashed" when you drew your feet out, and how she wished he'd take off his shoes and stockings and try, too. And to-day no doubt she was wild with life as he had seen her then, and he was going to die. Then his mind returned upon its gloomy track of wishing there could be more money for her, and at that moment of drear speculation the Mixwell Flour man drove up.

Lydia came home in the highest spirits, demurely held in check, because, if she should send the ball of pleasure spinning, there was no one to toss it back. But there had been plenty this afternoon, birds and trembling

leaves and warmth of sun. She felt bottled full of outdoor gloriousness, and only careful lest some of it escape and spill over on Jonathan, to dampen him in his reserve. It was deeper than common to-night, and she glanced at him once or twice, inquiringly. Suddenly she broke the silence, anxiously in her turn.

"Ain't you a mite yellor round your eyes?"

Jonathan looked at her solemnly in acquiescence. He might well be yellow, he thought, with the misery of that palpitating heart wherein the rest of him must share.

"Mebbe I be," he said, and Lydia stared anew at the gentleness of his accord. He had never willingly accepted "doctors' trade" or the prescriptions from her own herb-closet, and she, with him, was used to thinking him invulnerable.

"You better ride over to the street to-morrer," she ventured, "and see if Doctor Price don't say you're out of order. I could steep you up some thoroughwort, if you'd only take it."

"No," said Jonathan, "'tain't thoroughwort I need. You let me be."

But, since Lydia was to become a widow, he was at once sorry because he had spoken curtly and amended it by asking about her day.

Supper was over now, and Lydia had no time to talk. It was bread-making night, and she had to go over to Aunt Lindy's for yeast. They made yeast, she and Aunt Lindy, turn and turn about, and their bread was famous. So she went flying along the road with her cup, and once she stopped to look back at the house she loved in this latest light of day. And having

paused, she stared incredulous and then turned upon her track and came racing home again like one possessed. So Jonathan thought as he saw her on the way. He was standing by the bench, pipe in hand, though he had not lighted it. Lydia was not used to passionate interrogation, whatever he might have done, but now all restraints, he saw, were gone. She flew up to him and stood there shaking with her trouble. Jonathan, absorbed in his own affairs which he knew were also hers, looked at her in wonder.

"What is it, Lyddy?" he asked kindly, out of the softness of his own physical ill. "Suthin' stung ye, child?"

"O Jonathan," she pelted at him, "how could you, oh, how could you?"

Jonathan had an influx of his old imperiousness and irritation.

"What under the sun's the matter o' you, Lyddy?" he returned. "If you've hurt yourself, you tell what 'tis and done with it."

"That nice red barn," she lamented. "Why, 'tis the prettiest sight anywheres round with all that creeper climbin' up the corner, and now you've let him paint that sign acrost it and it's spoiled for ever'n' ever."

Jonathan drew a breath of relief. She was not hurt, after all. It was only her feelings. He was willing enough to turn out for them when it could possibly be, but as to Mixwell Flour, he realized, she would know sometime how hard he had tried to realize every cent he could for her. She was clinging to his arm.

"O Jonathan," she besought him, "you give him

back his money. He's comin' along next week. Aunt Lindy says so. He's took her sewin'-machine to git it fixed for her. You paint it out now — there's that red paint we got for the tie-up door. You paint it out, Jonathan, and then you give him back his money."

Jonathan put a hand on her shoulder.

"You ain't got any call to concern yourself with the farm buildin's, Lyddy," he admonished her kindly. "Now you run and git your yeast, and then you go in and see to your bread."

But Lydia did not go to get her yeast. She walked into the house uncertainly, as if she could not see her way, and Jonathan watched her. And having had his smoke, he, too, went in and found her sitting in the dark, a little figure perfectly still.

"You made your bread?" he asked.

"No," said Lydia, not too loudly nor too softly, but hardly as she was used to answer Jonathan.

He paused, lighting the lamp to look at her. She was sitting with her hands folded in her lap; but he thought she looked well in health, as he would have said, for her cheeks were scarlet.

"Ain't you goin' to make it?" he pursued.

"No," said Lydia.

"What you mean to have for breakfast?"

"Cream-o'-tartar biscuits."

"Well," said Jonathan, "I guess I'll poke off to bed."

But she did not move, and he had reached the door when her question struck him like a shot deliberately planted.

"Jonathan!"

"Well," said Jonathan.

"Ain't there such a thing as widder's thirds?"

Jonathan, at the impact of it, seemed to himself to be sinking down. He leaned against the door-post, but he could not look at her. So she, he knew, had read the secret of that mortal menace. She, by some means, had known about his heart, and she, with him, was thinking not of him and how she should bear the loss of him, but of how she should be left. She was looking at him, and he had to answer.

"Yes, Lyddy," he said, in a tone she seemed to puzzle over. "I guess every widder'll git her thirds."

Again and again that night, in his recurrent wakings, the question flew at him like a terrible bird bred out of darkness and buried its beak in his heart. It was inconceivable that Lydia, suspecting his illness, could so have thought of his death. She was the least self-seeking of women, and more than that Jonathan had made no doubt that his loss would be a crushing blow to her. And here she was in the first instant of the unaccustomedness of grief, weaving her future plans. Perhaps she was plotting it all out through her own sleepless hours, for whenever he woke it was to find that she had not yet come to bed. In the early morning, when he rose, there was no sign of her in the room at all; but he came upon her stepping about the kitchen with a nervous haste. It was impossible to speak, but he glanced at her and found her changed. She was hollow-eyed, exhausted, he could see by the droop of her shoulders and the trembling of her hands. Yet she was excited, too, and, if that could be, in a way, he thought, triumphant. She was gloating over her

thirds. They ate breakfast almost in silence. When they rose from the table, she spoke to him rather in a timid interrogation.

"Don't you want I should steep you some thoroughwort?"

"No," said Jonathan. "I don't."

He looked at her sternly now, out of his righteous anger. But she ventured once again.

"Jonathan," said she, "you look dretful yellor."

"I know I do," said Jonathan, "but I expect to look wuss'n that 'fore I git through. But I shall git through in the end. Nobody needn't worry about that. I shall git through."

Then he strode out to the barn, and with a purpose he did not recognize save that it was savage, harnessed the horse and, without a word to her to ask whether she had any errands, drove away to the street. Once when Jonathan was a little boy and had broken a window, his father had taken him by the shoulder and shaken him, and this in the presence of the other boys. And one of them had commented frankly, "I'd be awful mad if my father pitched on me like that." Young Jonathan said nothing, but his feelings might have been translated in the old phrase, "I'm not mad but I'm hurt." And after all these triumphant years, something of that hurt was working in him now.

When Lydia, getting dinner with the dragged step of the sleepless and weary, was just dipping the greens out of the kettle, she heard Jonathan driving furiously into the yard. She dropped her skimmer and ran out of the door to look if peradventure the impossible had happened and Dill had run away. Jonathan



leaped out of the wagon and was striding toward the house, and Dill, settling into the shafts in the manner of one who had met an unexpected rigor, turned upon him a mild reproachful eye. Jonathan was hurrying along with swift steps, and Lydia, prepared for his wrath, had time to realize she had not known how terrible it would be. Wild currents were surging within him. He had come home to a wife who prized him so little that she had even speculated on her thirds, but a savage impulse had risen in him to make her prize him, whether she did or no. And then he had come in sight of his own barn, and a new amaze had knocked the savage impulse out, and brought up the man who knew the rights of property and would not have them violated.

"That Mixwell Flour man been round here?" he hurled at her.

"No," said she.

"Who's been paintin' out them letters on my barn?"

She looked at him and did not speak. Jonathan, beside himself, not with anger, but amazement, went on raging less to her than to himself:

"Somebody's been and clim' up there and painted out much as a third o' that sign. Looks if they took the red paint I got for the tie-up door. If I ketch 'em, I'll hang 'em high as Gilroy's kite."

"No," said Lydia, in a small but even voice. "I guess you won't, Jonathan. I wouldn't if I's you."

His glance included her, as some one who was not a mere confidant, but a spectator, it might be, of the deed.

"You know anything about it?" he hurtled at her.

"Yes," she said. "I know."

"You see him do it? Who was't that done it, Lyddy? You speak up."

"Well," said Lydia, in a voice of sudden fullness, "I will speak up. If you must know, 'twas me. I painted out them letters, and I'd paint 'em out twice over."

"When'd you do it?" he inquired weakly.

"Last night."

"That why you didn't come to bed?"

She nodded.

"How'd you git up there?"

This, as it was not material, she did not seem prepared to tell, but moistened her dry lips instead.

"You didn't drag out that long ladder and h'ist it up there?"

The tone threatened her. She nodded.

"How'd you see?"

She pointed with one tragic hand at the barn lantern, the chimney again shining with cleanliness after its hours of use. Jonathan came a step nearer.

"Lyddy," he said, "didn't you know that was my property? You ain't crazy, be you?"

She did not retreat, nor did her eyes quail by one beam, but when she answered, the tone was shrill as if it cost her something.

"Jonathan," said she, in words that had been arranging themselves in her mind like the careful patchwork she was accustomed to fit together for a quilt, "I didn't paint out all them letters. It wa'n't because I didn't have time, though it 'most killed me reachin' up so fur. There's twelve letters in them two words — Mixwell Flour — and I painted out jest four."

Jonathan was staring at her in perplexity, not rage.

"Well," said Lydia, "don't you see? Four's a third o' twelve, ain't it?"

"Yes," said Jonathan, "four's a third o' twelve."

"Well, when I see them two words up there and I knew I couldn't git 'em down by hook or by crook, because 'twas your property, the barn was, and I knew it's well as you do, it come into my head I'd heard somewheres if a man died his widder come into her thirds. And you wa'n't goin' to die, Jonathan, and so I could bear to spec'late on it, and I says, 'If she comes into a third when he's gone, why, she must have some kind of control over a third whilst they're both alive.' So I painted out a third o' them letters — my third 'twas, Jonathan. That's all."

Then something marvelous happened, something that brought the rich blood to her cheeks and kept the luster in her eyes for many a happy day. Jonathan bent over and swept her into his arms. He bowed his face upon her hair and spoke with a sob such as the boy Jonathan might have given those years ago.

"That all, Lyddy? Was that all you meant? You wait till to-morrer, and I'll paint out the rest, and when he comes along I'll give him back his money. If he don't want to take it, I'll break his bones."

They stood there in a breathless content, and Lydia even forgot to wonder whether the greens would boil away to rags.

"And, Lyddy," Jonathan was pursuing, in a smothered voice of almost shamefaced happiness, close to her ear, "the doctor says there's nothin' in the world the

matter with me except my food's been distressin' me, and I've dranked too much coffee."

"Well," said Lydia innocently, out of her girlish dream, "I thought you was lookin' kinder yellin'."

## WHITE PEBBLES

**I**T was little more than nine o'clock, but the lover and the beloved were standing at her mother's gate, saying good-night. He was Abner Bond and she was Annie Dole, and for a long time, as it seemed to their young acquaintance with life, they had been fond of each other and had known that the tie between them was to last forever. But to-night, though the lilacs were out, and there was the smell of warm earth to upbear their fine, cool fragrance, they were both on edge with anxious expectation. Abner was going early, since there had been troublesome things to talk over, chiefly of her engendering; and because they had come up, he had had to combat them. It hardly seemed like a lover's evening at all.

Abner was big and bright-eyed, as could be seen by day, and Annie knew quite well how he looked without even the moon to help her. She was proud of him, though she sometimes thought, with an accustomed trouble of mind, that he looked too much like that picture of Uncle Abner, who had lived by himself down on the Birch Road, and had died alone in great poverty, and then was found to have what she felt, with awe, to be a "lot of money" sewn up in his feather bed. Abner had inherited the hoard. His Aunt Clary, Uncle Abner's sister, had given it to him, and he had clapped

it into the bank. She was afraid of the picture of Uncle Abner, and turned away from it whenever she felt the memory of it coming.

Abner knew exactly how she looked, too, without the moon to aid,—a slender brown thing, with little stubbed hands that had worked themselves into hardness: for she and her mother had inherited only poverty when her father died. She, too, had a bright, ardent gaze, but there were lines of wistfulness between her brows. Her face seemed to be always seeking something. Abner thought, in a vague way, it was happiness she sought, and he meant to capture and cage it for her. Yet it would have to be in his own fashion, for Annie, he knew, in spite of her hard life, had never learned the value of money. Her hand was on his arm now, and it, as well as her voice, seemed to be pleading.

“Don’t you like a porch, Abner? Don’t you truly want it? Don’t you think ’twould be nice in summer-time? I could set out there to shell peas, and you could drop down when you come home from work, and wait till dinner was called. I should think you’d admire to have a porch.”

He was frowning now, the moonlight let her see; but it was rather with perplexity, she knew, than any sort of displeasure. He was wondering how he could deny her what, he felt sure, was best for her to be denied; but before he could find words Annie spoke again.

“Your aunt mentioned it,” she ventured, a little timidly as she called on outside testimony. “Your aunt said, ‘If you and Abner are goin’ to live in his old house, you better put on a good big porch to’t, quick as ever you can. A porch’ll be a sight o’ comfort to

you both. It's a good deal easier to start right than 'tis to begin over.' That's just what she said, Abner."

"She knows nothin' at all about it," he returned, with a ready harshness, glad to resist an antagonist who was not on the spot. "Buildin' costs money."

"'Twouldn't cost so awful much." The wistful voice seemed to be beseeching him to an end more important than the betterment of houses. "You could use the lumber out o' the old tool-house. She said so."

"Well, the work costs." He drew himself up with violence. "I tell you, Annie," he said, "Aunt Clary don't know no more than the dead about the expenses o' livin'. What's she live on? A little toast and a mite o' soup and a cup o' weak tea. If ever anybody had a chance to put money by, it's Aunt Clary."

"But she don't put it by." Annie spoke instantly, as if the words had been ready a long time. "She gives it away just as fast as she gets her hands on it. She give me my blue silk, for nice, and she give the minister's wife a new oilcloth. She ain't got a stingy thread in her body. She's the only one—" Her voice, rushing piteously on, stopped short, and he took up the conclusion slowly and as if now he were really angry with her.

"The only one o' my name that ain't close. That's what you mean, ain't it?"

She did not answer. She stood there wondering if he could hear her heart.

"Well," said Abner, "maybe we be close; maybe we be. But I should like to know which's the worst, to save while you can and end somehow decent, or come on the town? It's mighty easy to spend all ye got; and

when ye're old and worked out and cry for more, who's goin' to listen?"

He flung out the question defiantly.

"I don't know," said Annie vaguely, and yet with passion. "I don't know who's goin' to listen." She had the air of feeling deeply and yet finding no argument to entrench herself within. Then she caught blindly at what she knew. "There's your Aunt Clary. She ain't stingy, and if she was in need of anything, everybody'd run. Everybody in this town."

The blood had settled in his face. He felt it like the pain of tears. The one word had stung him.

"That ain't an easy thing to bear," he said hoarsely.

"What ain't, Abner?"

"You said 'stingy.'"

"Well." She hesitated here, and he, driven on by some secret shame and the anger of feeling it, had to urge her further. And she had to answer. They both found themselves running along a course their secret fear had pictured many a time: for Abner knew what she felt about his inherited tendency, and she had seen, simple as she was, whither her terror would some time lead her.

"You say I'm stingy," he threw at her sharply. "That it?"

"O Abner!" Here she waited and wished she were as clever as he. Then she could tell him so that he would understand. "It's only," she ventured, "it's only I'm kind of 'fraid. I don't want you to be too lavish. Jest free-handed, that's all I ask. And it ain't for myself and anything I want, even the new porch. It's for fear — O Abner, don't we know where



such things lead to?" She caught her breath over the thought.

His answer came short and sharp.

"You're afraid I'll die same as Uncle Abner did, and leave such a name as he did. Miser! that's what they called him. You're afraid of that." Sharply as his tone rang, the words gave her a delusive hope that he was in sympathy with her, that he was following her mind, that he saw it all as she did.

"Wouldn't it be awful?" she breathed.

"Well, I calculate you don't want to marry anybody that's in the way o' bein' a miser," he said, and again she innocently capped him.

"I'd be afraid to, Abner. Don't you think a girl ought to be afraid?"

But while she waited for an affirmative, he turned on his heel with sudden decision and left her standing there.

"You've said it," he threw back at her. "You've cast me off. Good-by."

He was gone, and she stood there by the gate, her eyes bereft when they lost him in the shade of the big elm, and a sharp pain in her heart.

Abner swung on through the night, all throbbing anger, not with her, he would have said, but with the hard circumstances where he found himself. He often had these resentments against life, the push and urge of necessity constraining him to a natal bent he was half afraid of; and this he had grown to champion while he hated it, because Annie, he knew, had so long feared it for him, though only now had she spoken.

When he went into the kitchen, he found his mother waiting for him, a tall, fair woman with leisurely ways,

informed with power. People said that, in some fashion or other, without in the least seeming to, she had managed to set a good table and do her part in public works in spite of her husband, who was one of the miserly Bonds, and as if without his knowledge. But Abner was a chip of the old block and harder than the parent knot. He loved her, but he went his way. To-night, alive to the trouble in his mind, he was sorry to find her waiting for him; but she spoke at once, and he threw off his ire to listen.

"Abner, you better run over to Aunt Clary's and see what's the matter. She's sent for you."

"Sent for me?" he repeated. "What's the matter? She sick?"

"No. Timmie Gill was here with a cup o' yeast, and I made him run over and see. I've got this kind of a stitch in my back, and I didn't want to resk it unless I had to. But Timmie said she was settin' up by the winder; said she was all right, only jest she wanted to see you."

"Well," said Abner. "Think I better go over to-night or wait till mornin'?"

"Why, I guess I'd go over to-night," said his mother. "You know she's got a kind of a bad heart, though it ain't troubled her scursely this long time. I wish to goodness she'd come over here and live 'long of us."

Abner was not listening. He strode forth, leaving the gentle current of her talk to run on without him. But once outside, he hurried off with a speed hastened by the sudden recurrence of his hot emotion of the evening. It came to him that he wanted to see Aunt Clary whether she wanted to see him or not. She was to

blame for Annie's defection toward him. Her lavishness, at least, had given Annie argument against his thrift.

The little house, set near the road, with cinnamon roses and yellow lilies by the door, was quite dark, but her voice, clear, humorous always and very kind, came to him from the window where she sat, the oval of her face a paleness under the moon.

"Come right in, Abner. I knew you'd be along."

While he was opening the door into the little entry, finding his way unerringly where he had gone all his life, always the path to some kind indulgence of hers, she had risen and lighted her shining lamp. There she stood, turning up the wick and looking round to smile at him, a small slight creature with a delicate pale face, black eyes, and white hair waved as no art could do it. Because the night was warm, she had slipped on a thin mauve muslin, made in an old-fashioned way, and in the lamp-light it seemed to envelop her like a mist. When Abner really saw her, his anger died, she looked so frail; but a spark of resentment in him flared up, and he thought she ought, by rights, to be told that he and Annie had parted and that it was half her fault. She sat down again by the window and took up her palm-leaf fan.

"I was possessed to see you," she said, "and have a dish o' discourse. I thought maybe you was over to Annie's, but I knew if I set up long enough you'd come."

Abner threw his cap on the floor and took his place in the armchair by the other window. He gazed at her across the little table, and ran his fingers through his

hair. Then she noticed how tired his eyes looked and the pallor that was new to him.

"What is it, Abner?" she asked, with a quick solicitude shifted from her own needs to his. "You look pale. You ain't sick, be you?"

He shook his head. The nausea of grief was suddenly upon him, a feeling such as he had never really known, and he wondered whether he was to feel it always, now he had said good-by to Annie.

"No, no, Aunt Clary. What's the matter? What'd you send for me for?"

"Well!" She rested her fan on her knee and bent forward to him, a humorous bright alertness in her face. "What do you s'pose happened to me yesterday afternoon? I had one o' them miserable heart spells, and I pitch-poled off my chair, and when I waked up I was here on the floor flat as a flounder. If I wa'n't mad!"

Abner was at once tenderly furious with her.

"There!" said he. "Ain't I told you so? Ain't mother told you a million times? How long you goin' to live here by yourself and worry us all to death?"

"Law," said Aunt Clary easily, "I guess I sha'n't die no sooner for livin' alone than I should if I was in the best o' company. That wa'n't why I've routed you out to-night. Abner, long as you've lived, ever sence you was a little boy, whilst I've kep' house here alone, have you ever been into my shed chamber?"

Abner stared at her. The bright black eyes were clear and cool, but he wondered if Aunt Clary's attack had somehow changed her.

"Why, no," said he, "I dunno's ever I have."

"I guess you do know it," said Aunt Clary. She looked a little excited, though in a pleasant way, as if what she had to impart contributed to a triumph of her own. "And I know it. You ain't been into that room, and nobody else ain't, for it's been locked up ever since your Uncle Abner died, and I've had the key."

Abner was looking at her now as intently as she looked at him. This night was bringing Uncle Abner into the forefront of recollection in a way that seemed significant.

"Abner," said Aunt Clary, with a sudden accession of interest, as if now actually she were turning into the path that led whither she had resolved to go, "you were a little boy when your Uncle Abner died. How much do you know about him?"

"I know all I need to," said Abner roughly from the excess of his hurt feeling. "I guess I've heard enough about it anyways."

"No, you ain't, Abner." Her eyes were warning him. "Nor we ain't any of us Bonds heard enough about him and the way he come to his end, not if there's any danger of our goin' the same road. Well, Abner, there's been danger o' my goin' that road myself. Ever you think o' that?"

"What do you mean, Aunt Clary?" he asked her, staring in pure surprise. "Not as he did, savin' and stintin' himself and not havin' enough to eat?"

She nodded at him. He thought he had never seen her eyes so bright.

"It's quite a story," she said. "Abner, d'you ever think it out how 'twas the Bonds got to dwellin' on

rakin' and scrapin' and savin' up and never spendin' a shillin' they could hoard? "

"No. I s'posed 'twas because they had sense enough to see they might come to want."

"'Twas because they had come to want. 'Twas Mis' Abner Bond pretty soon after the Revolution, when she'd lost all her men folks and had that one little boy to bring up, and she was out o' health and she couldn't work, and he was too little. And the only way for them was to save, and he grew up as tight as the bark to a tree, and so'd his son, and I guess we're all kinder marked with it."

Abner was holding his head higher.

"That's all folderol, Aunt Clary," said he. "You know 'tis, and so do I. You're just light-headed, bein' sick so."

She paid no attention to him.

"Well, be that as it may," said she, "the Bonds are as tight as the bark to a tree and I've seen the day when I was as nigh as any of 'em: for I've wanted a ribbon bow to please the man I was goin' to marry, and I put off gettin' it because I couldn't bear to run my hand into my pocket and bring out the money." Then she laughed, a quick young laugh. "Law, Abner, you needn't look like that. He died 'fore he found out what kind of a creatur' I was, and whenever I have a heart spell, such as happened yesterday, I say to myself, 'I wonder if I'm goin' to see him. I wonder if there is such a thing.' "

The thought of Annie and the irrevocable separation of mortal kind clutched him with a pang. It seemed, suddenly, a foolish thing that parted them.

“ Well,” said Aunt Clary. “ I’ve got suthin’ that’s queerer by half to tell. When your Uncle Abner died — that was my brother, you know,— he died because he was too stingy to live, and that’s when I got my first lesson. I says to myself that day when we found him, and I says to myself every day for months afterwards, ‘ That’s what I’m comin’ to. I’m comin’ to that just as sure as I’m a livin’ woman that’s afraid to spend.’ And then one night — it was just such a night as this, Abner, with the full moon pourin’ in,— it come to me I needn’t die that way. I’d heard old Parson True’s sermon on Free Will, and I says, ‘ I ain’t bound. I’m free. I needn’t die a miser ’less’n I choose to.’ ”

“ That when you begun to give away every solitary thing you got? ” Abner inquired.

He said it lightly, but he felt himself shaken by the prophetic tremors that had moved her: the decrees of race, the spell of foregone destinies.

“ No, I set out to; but, try as I would, I couldn’t. It ’most killed me to part with anything I could call my own. I run downhill over it, and folks said I was goin’ into a decline. And they said ’twas the death of Mer-riman Blake that was killin’ me. I let ’em think so. ’Twas true enough, no woman, maid or widow, ever felt a loss more. But he was a beautiful creatur’, and I knew I’d see him some time if I didn’t kill my soul or wither it up ’fore I got to him. No. What was killin’ me was that I’d undertook to learn myself not to be a Bond, and I didn’t know how. The Bonds were too strong for me.”

She had pondered upon the problem of her thralldom, he could see, over and over, through all the days and

nights of her lonely years. He was at once passionately alive to what she was about to say. It seemed to be his destiny also, in a tremendous way, the destiny of Annie even, because it was that of the Bonds who were to come after him.

"You see," said Aunt Clary, "I'd undertook to do suthin' I didn't know how to do. There was Abner's property even. I tried to give it away; but I was a Bond, and it stuck to my hand."

"You give it to me," said Abner.

"Yes, I did." Her eyes shone like lamps new lighted, and she laughed a little at the recollection. "But you never knew what a hard road I had to travel 'fore I got so's I could sign it away. Well, I'd thought it over and over till I was 'most crazed, and bymeby the walls o' the house drove me crazier. They seemed to know what I was thinkin'. They'd been built by Bonds, and papered and painted by Bonds, and all they knew how to say was, 'It's all Bonds, everything is. You can't get away from 'em.'"

Abner shuddered. She seemed, as she often did, to be formulating things that only moved about in a troublous night under the deep sea of his mind.

"So when I got kinder crazed with the house and the Bonds, and I dunno what all, I run out down the pine path into the woods; and I kep' on till I got to the b'ilin' spring, and there I set down and I put my head on my knees and I cried. Oh, how I cried!"

Suddenly, through her remembered tears, he seemed to hear Annie crying.

"It got to be along late in the afternoon; but I set there. I was kinder stupefied with all I'd gone through.



But I knew I'd got to poke back home and give the cat his supper — 'twas that kind of a wild maltee I had then — wouldn't touch a spoonful o' milk 'less'n I give it to him. So I lifted myself up, and I wiped my eyes. I often think now how blurred the woods looked and the spring, I'd cried so; and I got up, and I happened to glance down at my feet. And, Abner, what do you s'pose I see? "

"I dunno," said Abner. He was choked with his own tumult of mind. "What was it, Aunt Clary? "

She smiled a little, a fine, sweet smile that belonged to the remembered past.

"Well," said she slowly, "'twas a little mite of a white stone."

Abner stared at her and she smiled back at him. Then she rose and took the lamp.

"Come," said she, "le's go up in the shed chamber. You ain't never been there, not sence you were knee-high to nothin'. You're goin' now."

Abner followed her in a dazed obedience. Through the kitchen they went, and out into the shed, with its smell of pine wood and the orderly rows of limbs ready for the morrow's fire, and up the rough shed stairs. There, at the top, Aunt Clary put her hand in her pocket and took out a heavy key. She fitted it to the lock and turned it with a knowing twist of her small hand; and then she stepped over the sill, and Abner also did. The shed chamber was unfurnished, but its rafters were free from cobwebs, and the windows shone. Through one of them the moon looked in, in softest splendor. There were two or three chairs and a table, and braided mats were on the floor. Aunt Clary

stepped across the room with a decided tread, as if to a point where she was used to go, and Abner's gaze followed her to a row of old-fashioned chests under the eaves. He knew them, every one. It came to him that it was strange he had not wondered, all these years, where they might be. One was a dull blue; in that, Great-Uncle Marden's regimentals had been kept; and another, the curly birch, had held some of his own childish toys. And, as he looked he noted suddenly that each had its little padlock, and that Aunt Clary was about to open the first one by the window with a key she had taken from its nail. She met his gaze.

"Some o' the locks were broken," she said briefly. "I had these padlocks put on when that travelin' tinker come through the town. He asked me what I's goin' to keep in 'em all. 'Gold?' says he. 'No,' says I; 'meal. I lock 'em up so's the rats won't get to 't.' I guess he thought I was crazed."

Now Abner was as curious as the tinker.

"But what is it, Aunt Clary?" he urged. "What you got stored away?"

She lifted a lid and threw it back and set the brace to hold it.

"See here, Abner," she said. "You look and tell me what you think."

There they stood together over the chest while Abner stared and wondered. Aunt Clary watched him. Her face grew sad and tender. She even laughed a little.

"Well, Abner," she said at length, "what's it seem to you?"

He was still staring. His gaze came back to her.

"Why, Aunt Clary," said he, in a maze, "they're nothin' under the sun but little white stones."

She nodded, and her laugh came. She stepped to the second chest and opened it and propped its cover, and the third, and Abner went with her to the end. There they were, big sea-chests, smaller household chests, and all filled to the brim with quartz pebbles, white or gold.

"Well," said Aunt Clary, "what say?"

But he could say nothing. Amazement held him, and also a deep pity, lest she had, with infinite pains, saved what she conceived to be of value. But she was shutting down a lid. She shut them all with a decisive hand, and Abner asked mechanically:

"You want I should lock 'em up?"

"No," said she. "They're locked for the last time. Here's the key. You take it. Mebbe when the chests come into your hands, you'll want to do suthin' reasonable with 'em. Come, le's go downstairs. This is all there is to see up here."

Again Abner followed her; but when he offered to lock the door, she shook her head.

"I've done," said she, with one of her little whimsical twists of the mouth. "The shed chamber's served its turn. I don't believe I shall go into it no more."

When they were again in the sitting-room, she put her lamp down on the table and took her accustomed seat. Abner walked back and forth before her. It seemed to him a night when everybody was a little crazed, and he wondered foolishly if all this coil need have spun itself if it had not been full moon.

"Se' down," said Aunt Clary. "You do make me

nervous as a witch. Abner, where do you s'pose I got all them little stones? "

He shook his head.

"Well," said she, "you cast your mind back to that day I told you about, when I set by the spring and cried. Didn't I tell you I see a little stone? Well, the minute I set eyes on it suthin'— I dunno what 'twas, mebbe 'twas Lord God, mebbe 'twas my own mind, all tore to pieces as 'twas — suthin' says, 'If you was born to save and hoard, and you can't help savin', it might as well be one thing as another. If you save suthin' that's no value, you can't hurt nobody, and mebbe, if you enter upon it, 'twill take your mind off'n money, and you can give it away and not break your heart.' So I set out savin' little stones."

Abner could hardly bear it, the loneliness of it, the futile suffering.

"Aunt Clary," said he, "you didn't think there was any vally to 'em? You didn't believe they was gold, mebbe, or suthin' you could realize on? "

Aunt Clary laughed in a kindly scorn.

"No, I guess I didn't. I jest took 'em for suthin' to save, that's all, and the only reason I kep' to one sort was because it made a kind of a game of it, and I didn't feel as if I was such a fool."

She took up her fan and began slowly plying it back and forth. Suddenly she was aware that Abner was about to cry.

"I can't stand it, Aunt Clary," he told her brokenly. "All the time I was a little chap comin' over here, and you was givin' me cookies, and when you turned Uncle Abner's money over to me, all that time you were

throwin' away money with one hand and pickin' up little stones with t'other."

"Oh, no, I wa'n't," said Aunt Clary calmly. "I wa'n't throwin' money away. I al'ays put it where it would do the most good. There's only one place I wa'n't willin' it should be, and that's in my own pocket, p'isonin' my own hands. Well, that's all past and gone. Now we come to what I wanted to see you for this night. Abner, I've got the better o' bein' a Bond." She looked at him with her brightest glance and held her head triumphantly. "Fust thing I thought to myself after I got over my heart spell t'other day and had a cup o' tea, was to wonder what you'd say when you come on them chests o' little stones; for you'll be the one to clear up after they take me away. I says to myself, 'I must tell him about it, or he'll think I'm crazed.' And then it come over me I needn't ha' picked up them stones. I needn't ha' picked up one. I went back all them years to Parson True's sermon, and I says to myself 'Clary Bond, you're a fool. You've got free will and you've had it come seventy years, and if you should see the whitest, roundest stone that ever was right where 'twould break your neck to step on it, don't you pick it up.' And sence I said that to myself, and knew I was goin' to abide by it, I've had the fust happy minute I've known for years."

Abner was leaning over the little table staring at her. His face was flushed, his hair was wet and matted.

"Aunt Clary," he said with difficulty, "what you want me to do?"

He seemed to be asking what he should do with her foolish treasure upstairs; but his heart told him he

was begging to know what he should do for himself, for his unformed life and for all the Bonds who might come after him.

"There's one thing you can do," said Aunt Clary recklessly. "You take them chists away and empty out the rocks."

"I'll do it to-morrow," he promised her.

"No, you needn't, not till you get good and ready. I ain't afraid of 'em. They can't tole me on to add more and more. I've got free will now, and I can't dwell on anything else. First time I've ever been able to stomach thinkin' I was a Bond. I'm goin' to hang on to the good they've give me, and if I don't live more'n half an hour longer, it's goin' to be long enough for me to trample out the bad."

Abner got gravely on his feet. He took up his hat and held it as he did when he was going out of prayer-meeting. Life seemed to him a grave and solemn thing, a big thing, too, if you could be like Aunt Clary. His hands were shaking. Aunt Clary saw that, and was remorseful because she had so moved him.

"There," she said, "le's not talk any further to-night. Only when you feel to, you come over and cart away them rocks."

"I'll come," said Abner. "I'll be round early in the mornin' to see how you be. You take care o' yourself, Aunt Clary."

He hurried out into the moonlight, hat in hand, and when he was well away from her door, so that the sound of haste need not alarm her, he began to run. Annie was not asleep, he knew. He could not have slept after that moment of parting, and no less than

he loved her did Annie "set by" him. When he came panting and heated to her gate, he paused to listen. Nothing, he thought, had ever seemed so still as the garden beds that night. In this moment of hurried feeling he understood how easy it is to find stillness and absence when we have come in search of life, and how we must make haste to get warm arms about the life we love, lest it somehow flee from us. The front door was closed. That meant they had gone up to bed, and Mrs. Dole, he knew, slept in the east chamber. He walked lightly up the path and round the house, and when he stood under Annie's window, he called her name. Instantly she was there, lifting the screen; but she put it down as softly, and in a moment he heard the opening of the front door. At the corner of the house they met, by the great syringa, soon to be all bridal bloom, and Abner, with his arms about her, felt for a moment safe. But he knew he should never feel really safe again unless he were trying all the time, as hard as Aunt Clary tried, to escape to some higher land of freedom, where she had won her way. But out of all this the only thing he could say to Annie was that he shouldn't wait as long as Aunt Clary to stop being a Bond. He was going to do it now. And Annie, out of the unthinking ecstasy of meeting, could only smooth his cheek with her little stubbed hand, and wonder how she could ever have let him go.

"We'll have all the porches you want," he was promising her fervently. "We'll have a piazza all round the house."

"Oh, it ain't the porch," she hastened to say tumultuously. "It's what—" there she paused, for she had

no words to tell him it was only the visible symbol of the change she hoped for.

But Abner, even without the words, had understood.

“I know it,” he cried, all eagerness and haste. “’Tain’t the house you want different. It’s me. But you’re goin’ to have the piazza jest the same, and down below you’re goin’ to have garden beds, and paths between ’em, all little white stones. I know where I can get a lot.”



## CONFESSIONS

WHEN Andrew Haynes drove into the shady road that led by the sawmill and the brown brook from the tannery, he was quick-breathed with excitement over a desire fulfilled. The syndicate had at last decided on his rocky pasture that commanded the view, and the price he had grudgingly accepted was a third more than he had expected to get. He felt like breaking into a hoot or cry of animal satisfaction, as the catbird in the maple burst into one of its borrowed pæans in recognition of spring. He did draw a long breath now, and indulged himself in triumphant recollection of the hurried, anxious breaths that had gone to this consummation. At last, after plodding for years in the rut of his farm life, he was to have a substantial lift from this side issue, never thought of until two years ago: not so very much, no golden stream, but enough to buy more new tools and another acre or two of productive land. Since the prospect of the sale had come up, he had eaten and drunk and slept in it, interviewed men through that glacial air of indifference business is held to demand, and kept his mind in a tension that was like prayer. Andrew could see only one thing at a time, his mother used to say. If he had an apple, he held it so close to his eyes that it shut out the barn. His mother had said that when he was only

a boy; now that he was over thirty, hardened into the habit of life, it held inviolably.

But the strain had relaxed, and though he still brooded on his bargain, it was in a different way. And he even looked younger, going home through the May air, than he had that morning when he set out with uncertainty furrowing his brow. He flicked Jess again, and she put back her ears and lashed out willfully. But Andrew did not visit her caprice upon her as he might if he had come home defeated. Jess had grown cantankerous, he knew, but he had a vague and unregretful recognition of having had to hurry her too much of late. She was a sound creature, though a nervous one, and she had taken to resenting him and the suggesting whip.

Deeper and deeper the shade of the mill road received him. Then it withdrew, and let him into the light of the upland stretch near home. Somebody was on his steps when he drove into the yard, a stout old woman, her outline broken by an apron-band at the waist, scalloping in her girth. This was Aunt Drusilla Anderson, who lived "down the road a piece," quite alone since her husband's death, and as ready to answer a neighbor's call of need as if it were her rightful task. Andrew knew exactly how she would look as he drew near: he saw the noble forehead, the square chin, the fine nose, and eyes that seemed to take in the whole of things. Aunt Drusilla was shading her eyes with her hand, but as soon as she saw him she came down the steps with an easy, unhurried motion, and halted at the corner of the house where she might intercept him on the way to the barn. Andrew pulled in the mare,

more than ready now to get into her stall and see what she could find. He looked at Aunt Drusilla a moment, frowning with the effort to meet her point of view and keep from calling on her to rejoice because he had sold the land. Aunt Drusilla spoke first.

"You better come in as soon as you unharness. Mary's layin' down."

"Ain't she well?" Andrew asked her, in a quick responsiveness. Annoyance, too: it seemed perverse of Mary to thin the wine of his triumph by not being on deck to spice it.

Aunt Drusilla had a slow, persuasive voice, always softening the edges and creeping in under defenses when confidence had been denied her.

"Why," said she, "I guess Mary's kind o' give out. She felt so bad she sent that little Blake girl in to ask me to step over and see if I could do suthin'. But I ain't done anything except git her to bed. Well, you unharness and see what you think."

Andrew did unharness thoughtfully. Jess nipped at him, and he only poked her nose away. He was bewildered to his furthest mental bound. Mary had never, in her married life, been really ill. He wondered already if it could be typhoid. It was the sudden blow, he thought, that portended tragedy. When he had put Jess in her stall and again ignored a nip, he went into the house at a plunging gait, washed his hands at the sink, and made his way to the bedroom door. Mary lay in bed, her sallow face, with its delicate outline, not so much framed as softened by pale thick hair. Her brown eyes were wide open, and they regarded him gravely, with something indeed of that

solemnity which always breathes from the sick who are traveling a lonesome road. Aunt Drusilla now sat by the bedside and held her hand. Andrew stopped at the foot of the bed.

"Well!" said he. There was a tradition packed away in his mind that it was best to be jovial with the sick. It heartened them. "What you think you're doin' there?"

Aunt Drusilla got up and laid the hand gently back on the counterpane.

"You set down here," she said to him. "I'm goin' to heat her up a mite o' flour gruel. You'll want your supper, too. I'm goin' to stir you up some biscuits."

Andrew, left alone with his wife, felt only the embarrassment of their plight. Yet she neither seemed to share it nor did she ease his burden. Her gaze had shifted from him, and she now seemed to be looking, with an added solemnity and even a little curiosity, into some distance so far that it terrified him. For terror, indeed, he turned about and stepped, with a clumsy haste, back into the kitchen, where Aunt Drusilla stirred something in a bowl. She looked at him reproachfully, yet as not surprised. Her customary attitude was that of one prepared for anything, who might feel obliged to show a decent reproofness, but who had seen all patterns of life and was ready to match them up again.

"I 'most think you'd better go right back in there," she said, "and let her git holt o' your hand."

Andrew flushed and frowned. It seemed as if she wanted to make him ridiculous.

"I don't know why 'tis," said Aunt Drusilla, deftly

stirring and pressing out a lump of flour, "but when anybody's give out you can't do anything better for 'em than let 'em keep a holt o' your hand. Don't ye know how the dyin' do it when they can't neither hear nor see? They cling to ye as if they were tryin' to lash themselves to suthin' human — same's if you were drownin' you'd lash yourself to a plank."

Andrew felt a great sickness come over him. He had never known it before in this intensity, like definite nausea.

"You don't s'pose," said he, "Mary's goin' to be taken away?"

Aunt Drusilla turned her posset into a bowl.

"I don't really know what 'tis," said she. "That woman doctor was drivin' by to the train and I called her in, and she said a few things. Mary didn't seem to have anything to complain of. I understood she was beat out, that's all."

Then she disappeared into the bedroom with her bowl and spoon, and later she came back and, finding Andrew collapsed in the rocking-chair by the window, talked to him cheerfully about the price of butter and Elder Bixby's bees.

After he had fed the cattle and milked and roused himself to the eating of four or five biscuits abundantly buttered, she washed the dishes and prepared to go.

"I may not be back 'fore ten," said she. "I guess you better set right down in there, side of her, and hold her hand."

Andrew went miserably in. He had never held Mary's hand since the awkward dalliance of their early courting, when they sat before the air-tight in the front

room, and Mary had burned her best dress putting in a stick of wood, and he had charmed her by telling her he'd buy her a dozen dresses. There seemed to be no situation in life where it wouldn't be discomfiting to hold Mary's hand. If she were on her feet, she would be doing the chores, and always, like him, barely getting them done. As she was now, lying there in that amazing repose which yet seemed to have no peace about it, he felt as if to hold her hand was to put them both in the awful position of the one about to quit this life and the one left desolate.

He sank into the cushioned chair at her bedside, and still she did not look at him. Her hands, he was glad to see, were under the sheet. And presently, as if to absolve him from all responsibility toward her, she closed her eyes. As he sat there, a wave of something like anger rose in him. It was not against her. It concerned some powerful chance that had laid her here in mysterious helplessness, and at the same time made it impossible for him to do anything to save. He was hot with indignation against this unseen enemy. Was it Death? "Why," his beating heart cried out, "I can't do anything. I ought to have had some warning."

"Andrew," said his wife. She spoke with perfect clearness and sanity, as if she might be about to tell him his clean shirt was on the best-room bed. The sound of her voice shook him. His eyes were hot with tears. But what she had to say confirmed his terrors. "Andrew," said she, "I guess I'm goin' to die."

He could not answer. If she was to die, she might at least not talk about it.

"There's somethin' I've got to tell you," said Mary. "I've lived an awful life."

That brought speech to his tongue. "Mary," said he, "you've been one o' the best women on God's earth."

She turned her head a little on the pillow and looked at him with a quick and wondering scrutiny. He had perhaps never told her that. He had told her a great many things: some about the pasture and some about the milk and eggs, but never exactly this. But she had more to say.

"I ain't afraid to die, but I'm loath to die as I am. I'm a hypocrite. You never knew that, did you, Andrew?"

"You want to see the minister?" he asked her.

He wished he had her poor little hand now. If she would take it out from under the sheet, he thought he could hold her back from the tortuous paths her mind was roving.

"No," said Mary, "the minister wouldn't do me no good. Besides, he don't know me. He ain't never known me. When your Great-Aunt Sarah died, he says to me: 'Never did any woman take more faithful care than you've took of her. You're a saint, Mis' Haynes,' he says. 'You're a saint.'"

"Why didn't you tell me before?" said Andrew, with a clumsy dart at jollity. "He shall have a barrel o' Hubbardstons for that. Course you're a saint. If folks ain't told you so, it ain't because they didn't think it."

"No," said Mary dispassionately, regarding that far point in the distance as if it were the inner judge of her life to whom she was at last making all plain,

"I wa'n't a saint. All through Great-Aunt Sarah's sickness I jest hated her. When she wanted me to lift her, I'd think: 'You're as heavy as lead. Maybe I can do it this once more. Maybe I can't. You've got to die, anyways. What's the use o' killin' me besides?' And then I'd chirp up to her as budge as you please. 'Yes, Aunt Sarah,' I'd say, 'I'm comin'. That right? Don't you want me to h'ist you a mite higher?' "

"You hadn't ought to been liftin' anybody as heavy as she was," said Andrew. "What'd you do it for? Why didn't you call me?"

"Then there's the Bible class," said Mary. "We sent two barrells o' clothin' to the poor white folks down South. And the Ladies' Aid says to me — I believe every one of 'em said it fust and last — 'Why, Mis' Haynes, how do you find time to make so many little tyers, all you have to do?' And then I'd say, as if butter wouldn't melt in my mouth, 'Oh, I've jest took a few stitches here and there, and they count up in time.' But I could ha' cried, Andrew, I could ha' cried. I didn't want to make them little tyers. I wanted to work me a shirt-waist to wear to the grange."

"Why, you could have a new shirt-waist," said Andrew, in agony. He had not thought of Mary for two years and over. She was a part of himself, and he had not dwelt on his own being as he existed from day to day to put through the sale. But now here she was, fallen at her task and just as he had news for her — which mysteriously he could not give in the face of her overthrow — babbling of shirt-waists.

"And they told me my cake was nice," said Mary, in her new tone of enumerating these mysterious hor-



rible things she had found in the wallet of life. "They'd say so when I was so tired beatin' it I couldn't hardly stand; and there I'd be pourin' out the mugs o' coffee for 'em at the sociable, and they'd be standin' round eatin' my cake that cost me my life 'most, I was so tired, and I'd look at 'em and say: 'That was mother's receipt. I'm glad I had good luck.' And all the time I was thinkin' inside me, 'I wish 'twould choke you. I wish 'twas p'ison, and you'd drop down dead.' "

Andrew sat looking at her in an extremity of fear that would not let him take his eyes away. This was not Mary, some inner vision told him, Mary the custodian of household implements, past mistress in the deft art of using them, she who even knew where the barn broom was when it lost itself, and could sit by, making the hottest poultices, if you had a toothache, and never bother you by asking once if it felt better. Mary had been even softer to live with than mother herself, and both of them he had looked on with an unfaltering confidence as good women. "Your mother was a good woman," some one had said to him on the day of her funeral. "Your wife's a good woman, too." "Never was a better one," said Andrew, as well as the choke in his throat would let him. And now Mary, overthrown in the twinkling of an eye, was lying here and rehearsing the tale of her perjuries.

"I feel better a'ready," she said, "now I've begun to tell you."

"Well, I guess that's all there is of it," said Andrew, with his rough specific of bluntness. "Ain't any more, is there?"

"Oh, yes," said Mary, "there's a lot more. Seems if you hadn't known how 'twas any o' the time, Andrew, these last years specially. When you've asked me to do things, 'most always I've wanted to tell you to go and do it yourself."

Andrew had meant not to answer her according to her folly; but this pricked him, and he had to say:

"Why, never was anybody readier'n you've been to do a hand's turn at anything."

"Oh, no, I wa'n't ready," said Mary. "When you was away overnight, tryin' to auction off that land, I was so mean I made up my mind I wouldn't milk whilst you's gone. And then I knew how the cows would ache, and I did milk 'em. But one night I turned all the new milk over to the pigs so's't I shouldn't have to make so much butter when you got home."

"The Old Harry!" said Andrew.

He saw, in too vivid retrospect, the flood of new milk foaming into the trough. But immediately he reflected that these were the figments of a disordered mind. And presently Aunt Drusilla, having sped through her chores, was at the footboard, and he felt easier. Mary might even, he reflected, do herself a harm unless they watched her.

"You want the winder open?" Aunt Drusilla asked.

Mary's eyes must have answered, for Aunt Drusilla went at once and threw up the sash.

"I'm tellin' Andrew how wicked I've been," said Mary. "I ain't more'n half done it, but I feel the easier."

"Course you do," said Aunt Drusilla.

She sat down just over the sill, in the sitting-room,

not to breathe up Mary's air, and folded her plump hands in her lap. She was in a rocking-chair, but the chair did not move. Aunt Drusilla knew how to sit very still.

"But I ain't told it all," said Mary. Her brows were wistful in their troubled knitting. Yet with the opening of the window she had seemed a little calmer to the sight. The look of her was very sad to Andrew. She seemed so young and yet so old, so small and yet removed from him. He wished the frogs would stop their peeping down the lane. "I ain't told it all. I've hated everything, Andrew, for 'most two years. Yes, I said that, didn't I? And folks, I've hated them — them that hounded me. But if ever I should git well, and I don't expect I shall, I don't feel's if I could go on with it. I'm so tired of it, Andrew. I'm so tired o' hatin' things."

"Why, bless your heart," said Aunt Drusilla, "you're tired o' work, that's what you're tired of."

"Oh, no, I ain't," said Mary. "I like to work real well. I'm just wore out with hatin'."

Andrew's throat hurt him amazingly now, but he knew he had to understand things a little better, even if there was no help for them.

"Ain't there any o' the things you like, Mary?" he asked — "none o' the things about the house? The best chiny? 'Twas your mother's, you know. Don't you prize that?"

"No," said Mary kindly, yet with indifference, "I don't prize it a speck. It's only one thing more to take care of."

There seemed to be a further step to be dared into

the obscurity of her state; but even though he saw it dimly he could not yet essay it. There was a question that came in here, but he felt he could not see it plainly enough to ask it. There it was, the big, formless question. "Don't you care anything about me, Mary?" it seemed to be, but he couldn't grapple with it. He had an aching remembrance that when she had begun to talk she must have numbered him among the things she hated. But that was so incredible as coming from Mary that he pushed it away from him in a panic of distaste. Aunt Drusilla must have felt pity for him after a glimpse of his crumpled face: for she moved her chair out of his track and asked suggestively:

"Ain't you goin' to bring in some cool water from the well? Maybe we'd all like a drink?"

And Andrew hurried out.

In the late evening, when Mary, settled for the night, had fallen off to sleep, Aunt Drusilla found him by the kitchen window, his arms upon the sill and his head sunk on them, and touched his shoulder gently.

"You better go up, Andrew," said she. "I've turned your bed down. I'm goin' to camp out here on the sofa."

Andrew raised his head and looked at her through the moonlighted dusk.

"You don't s'pose I'm goin' to bed, do ye?" said he. "You don't s'pose I'm goin' to sleep? What do you think I'm made of?"

"You better go," said Aunt Drusilla. "She'll be down like this quite a spell."

"What's the matter of her?" he asked hoarsely. "What in God's name's the matter of her?"

"Why," said Aunt Drusilla, "I told you. She's beat out."

"What makes her out of her head? She ain't got no fever."

"Why, bless you, dear," said Aunt Drusilla, "she ain't out of her head. She's jest as much herself as you and I be. Only she's so beat out she can't help hatin' what's killin' her. Ain't you ever seen a horse that's been drove and hurried and not allowed a minute to think it over, up-hill and down-hill, ain't you ever seen him turn round and nip anybody? I have."

"Yes," said Andrew, in a low tone, "I've seen that." But as she talked a tiny seed of courage stirred within him. "Well," he said, "if she's tired, she can git rested. Nobody ever died o' bein' tired."

"Oh, yes, they did," said Aunt Drusilla. "My husband died o' bein' tired. I killed him."

Andrew sat there in the moonlight and stared at her.

"You're as crazy as Mary is," said he. "Your husband died o' pneumonia."

"Oh, yes," said Aunt Drusilla. "But he'd ha' got well, the doctor said, if he hadn't had a weak heart. I knew why his heart was weak. Doctor didn't. His heart was weak because I talked all the time, and I drove him so hard. I never give him a minute's rest."

"Why," said Andrew, "you was as good a wife as Mary in there. You and he never had a word, not to my knowledge; and I guess 'twould ha' got round."

"No," said Aunt Drusilla, "we never had a word; but that was because he always done what I wanted he should. I coveted everything that was goin'. I expected him to work like a dog and buy us a new buggy,

and I wanted him to ride with me all the time after we got it, and same time buy me more things. He got wore out."

"Why, he never worked no harder'n you did," said Andrew, trying to fit these vapors to his solid scheme of things. "When you begun to build that back ell, you was up 'fore light, gettin' your milk-work done, so's to have breakfast for the men."

"Well," said Aunt Drusilla, "who lived through it? I did. That's because I was stronger'n he was. He died the next fall."

Here Andrew felt an idea. It clove his skull like a pain.

"That wa'n't why that ell wa'n't finished off?" he asked.

"You needn't look fur to see that," said Aunt Drusilla dryly. "Course I never finished it. I let it be as 'twas for an eyesore to me, to remind me not to talk so much and not to drive so hard. I've suffered a lot with that ell, no more seem to it than if 'twas a shed; but I guess it's done me some good."

Andrew sat for a long time in the moonlight, and Aunt Drusilla, perfectly still, sat opposite. If he had been asked what he was thinking, he would have said he was wondering whether he ever knew the frogs to peep so loud. But after a while they heard Mary stirring in the bedroom, and Aunt Drusilla rose to go to her.

"Wait a minute," said Andrew. "Wait." His voice sounded harsh to him, and frightened him again with this sense of the strangeness of things. "Do you

b'lieve there's anything in this talk of folks gittin' to hate folks?"

"Oh, yes," said Aunt Drusilla calmly. "We git on folks' nerves. Course they hate us then. It's like horses and other critters. You scare 'em and they bite at you."

Then she went in to Mary, and Andrew rose and automatically, without any sense of the reasonableness of the act, went to the china-closet and lifted the cover of Mary's sprigged sugar-bowl. He picked out four or five lumps with much deftness; but when he set the cover on again it clinked.

"That you?" came Mary's voice. "What you want, Andrew?"

"Nothin'," said Andrew. "I've found what I's after."

He tiptoed out through the shed, because Mary's mysterious condition made the slightest noise a wrong to her, and into the barn, where his feet took on their usual clumsy haste. He went up to the stall where Jess had finished her allotment of hay and stood looking at the moonlit square of the doorway whence drama came to her: food, and the necessity of bits, and hasty recommendations to move a little faster than she could. When Andrew approached her head she came forward a step, and then, judging the question was not one of hay, retreated. He dropped the sugar before her in the manger. He had meant to feed her, but he hardly knew how to do it in a way that was not silly. Andrew did not understand why he had brought tribute to Jess: only everything seemed irritatingly pathetic in

a degree that threatened the stability of life. He didn't want horses to hate him, he thought angrily, as he stood in the barn door and watched the shadow of Aunt Drusilla moving back and forth across the curtain of Mary's window. He didn't want Mary to feel she hated folks. There seemed nothing to be done about it all, and he went in finally, drew off his boots in the kitchen, and having seen that Aunt Drusilla was comfortably stretched on the broad sitting-room lounge, crept up to bed.

The next morning when Andrew woke it seemed to him that everything was different. The night, in withdrawing, had pulled aside some veil that had strangely confused the contours of things, and again he should see them as they were. He almost believed he should smell coffee as he went down the stairs, and find Mary taking biscuits out of the oven as she did nearly every day in the year. There was the coffee smell. There were the biscuits. Aunt Drusilla had made them handily; but Mary was not there. Andrew stopped in the doorway, and the nausea of fear swept over him. Aunt Drusilla came out of the bedroom, a cup in her hand, and saw him there. She read the story of his white face and disordered look.

"She ain't no worse," said Aunt Drusilla. "She's had a cup o' milk. You go in and speak to her, if you want. I dunno's I should, though, till I'd got some breakfast into me. You can't be much use to sick folks unless you're stronger'n they be."

He sat down and ate his breakfast savagely, with the crude bodily sense that food was his only helper. Then, without giving himself time to shrink, he went



in to Mary. There she lay in her new majesty of helplessness, paler than he had remembered her, and in her eyes the solemn look of parting well upon its way. She was kind. She smiled at him, and Andrew tried to ask her how she was. Instead he found himself saying, in a scared haste, as if to beg her reassurance:

“Mary, you don’t feel them things you did yesterday — them things you said you did?”

“Hatin’ things?” asked Mary clearly, but with no appearance of sparing herself or him.

“Yes.”

“I don’t know’s I do,” said she. “I’m too beat out. If I lay here and don’t think of anything, I don’t have to hate ’em. But if I got up, I should.”

“Folks, too,” said Andrew. He seemed to be persuading her to defend the stability of his life. “I guess you didn’t mean that, Mary. I don’t b’lieve you meant you hated folks.”

“I don’t this mornin’,” said Mary, “because they ain’t houndin’ me. But when they’re at me all the time, tellin’ me to do this and coaxin’ me to do that, course I hate ’em. Anybody would. You can’t help it after ’bout so long.”

Andrew took up a little china vase from the mantel and looked it over curiously. He had known it ever since he was three years old, and his mother used to fill it with clove-pinks; but he had to look at something.

“Mary,” said he.

His voice was soft and half ashamed, his wooing voice of years ago. Mary turned her head quickly on the pillow and gazed at him. But she apparently

saw no more than the workfellow she had known in the short range of their double harness, and her startled eyes lost interest.

"Mary," said Andrew, "I've sold the land."

"Have you?" said Mary, with no more than the civil design of pleasing him. "Well, that's good. I'm glad for you, Andrew."

"I got a thousand more'n I expected." He was watching her now to note the effect of his drama. "I thought I'd ask it, and, by George! I got it."

"That's good," said Mary.

Andrew thought he could afford to joke a little to cheer her.

"You don't hate the land, do you?" he inquired.

"No," said Mary, "not now, not now it's sold. I did hate it because we had to talk so much about it; but now it's gone we sha'n't have to any more."

It was incredible to him; but he made his great essay.

"Well, Mary, this is what I come in to tell you. 'Twon't be many days 'fore I git that money, and what do you think I'm goin' to do with it? I'm goin' to give it all to you."

Then she did see how kind he meant to be, and it touched her.

"No, Andrew," said she, "don't you do it. It's terrible good of you, but I ain't got no use for it."

"You ain't got no use for all that money?" he hurled at her. "Why, jest you think what it'll do for you. Jest you think. You could hire you a girl. You could go away and stay six months. You could see the Rocky Mountains."

"'Twon't do anything where I be now," said Mary calmly. "'Twill for you, Andrew, because you're alive, and your strength ain't gone; but 'twon't do no more for me than so much paper rags."

Andrew stood there a moment gripping the little vase in his hand. He wished he knew how to get out of the room without letting her see she had overthrown him. For Mary hadn't meant to. She had answered his plain questions, that was all.

"Well," said he—"well." He turned to go, and then at the door he stopped. Her eyes were closed now, and he had, in this rage against the terrible aspect of change, to interrogate her impassive face. "Mary," said he.

She opened her eyes.

"What is it?" she asked.

He lingered as awkwardly as he had in the old days when he had courted her. His question came breathlessly and brought its pang.

"Mary, is there anything or anybody you don't hate?"

She was silent a long time, and then she laughed a little.

"Why, yes, Andrew," said she, "I guess there's one thing."

"What is it?"

"It's that larkspur root out on the edge of the cow-yard," said Mary. "Don't you remember, it come up unbeknownst to either of us. We didn't know how, unless the birds carried the seed. And don't you know how the cows trampled it last summer, and I never got it moved because I never had the time, and this spring

it come up as green as a leek 'fore anything else? And that was what I was doin' when I fell over and laid there a spell before I sent for Aunt 'Silla. She says I fainted away."

Andrew walked out of the house and then to the edge of the barn-yard. There was the larkspur root, in bravery of brightest green. He might not have known it from a baby nettle, but the old spade lay beside it, and there were the marks of Mary's futile strokes. Andrew stood there a long time, his foot upon a rail of the fence, and thought. Yet where his thoughts led him he could not say. The larkspur had a curious interest for him: it seemed so insufficient to take one last stroke for when a woman was tired enough to faint. It seemed also a madness to care nothing about the sale of a lot of land, and to single out a willful plant that had chosen to come up in a perilous place and spend extravagant pains upon it. Andrew felt incapable of studying it out; but presently he began to whistle softly in a way that had no cheer in it, and brought out his sharp new spade. Mary might have had that, he thought, with a sudden rage against her, if she had remembered to look about instead of taking the old one with a crumpled edge. He got the wheelbarrow also, and wheeled it to the front of the house, and there, under a window, he spaded out the gravelly soil in a generous oblong and wheeled it all away. But when he got down three feet he shuddered at his task: for now the oblong looked to him like a grave.

Aunt Drusilla came to the door once while he was digging.

"Mary wonders what you're doin' of," she remarked,

and Andrew, resting on his spade, looked into the grave and answered, bitterly:

“What’s it look like to you?”

“I dunno,” said Aunt Drusilla cheerfully. “Might be anything, fur’s I know.”

Andrew began to work again.

“Tell her I’m goin’ to smooth it over here,” he said, “where I banked up the house.”

So Aunt Drusilla went in and delivered her message exactly; and Andrew, after he had wheeled away his last load of gravel, brought a load of manure and packed it in the bottom of the grave, and then loads of black loam and more manure, and when he had smoothed the top he had a garden-bed. Then he went back to the barn-yard and set his sharp spade under the willful larkspur root and lifted it carefully and wheeled it to its new home in the rich oblong bed. Andrew understood growing things, though he had never taken much stock in flowers unless they led to something edible, and he did his task with nicety. And when the larkspur had been abundantly watered he stood and looked at it and wondered at himself for a fool.

Almost at once things in the house settled into a tranquil routine. A square, strong-armed girl called Sally Austin was summoned from her sequestered lane whence she “went out dressmaking” or nursing, as the need might be, to do the work, while Aunt Drusilla swung from her own house to this with the regularity of a well-ordered pendulum. The neighbors heard that Mary Haynes was sick, and came bringing blanc-mange and jelly, and offering to watch at night. But Mary,

when she heard their voices, turned her face to the wall and would not answer. In her brief moments of leaving her bed to sit in the eared chair, she would not go to the window lest some of them should see her, and Aunt Drusilla and Sally Austin fought a brave fight to shield her. She was asleep, they would tell the neighbors, or she was not so well to-day. Morning and night Andrew went in to see her; but he had hardly a word to say. He couldn't tell her about the farm, because he **knew she hated it**. He couldn't tell her the beautiful green check for the sale of the pasture was ticking away in the bank. He couldn't tell her when he cut his thumb, because, since she hated him, she must hate his thumb also. And Mary looked at him with solemn eyes that did not seem to see him, and all she had to say to him was civilly to ask him what the weather was.

Toward the last of June Andrew came in, in the middle of the afternoon, to bring his empty dinner-pail. He had been down in the long pasture mowing. The kitchen had on its air of leisure. The sink was empty, and the cat lay in the sun. From the stairway he heard the sound of Sally Austin's voice in "Lord Lovell" while she changed her dress. Andrew knew what Mary was doing. She was lying in bed there, with that mysterious spell upon her. A great wave of lonesomeness began to sweep upon him, just as it used to in the few times when, a little boy, he had come from school and found mother was not at home. He stood for a moment in the kitchen, dumb with longing, his hands clenched in misery.

Then, almost as if in answer, there came a voice from the bedroom — Mary's voice.

"Andrew," it called excitedly, "that you?"

She wanted him, he understood, for some common-place service, now Sally Austin was above, and hurried in to her. Mary was sitting up in bed, and it struck Andrew for the first time that she was growing plump. Her cheeks were pink; her eyes were shining.

"Andrew," she began, "what's that out the winder?"

Andrew looked and saw nothing unusual.

"What winder?" he inquired. "There! you lay down. You mustn't git nerved up."

"Why, that!" said Mary. "Don't you see that tall green stalk all thick o' buds?"

"Oh," said Andrew. It seemed a small thing to have blown up such a breeze. "Don't you know what 'tis?" His voice shook here, and surprised him, and he felt the need of humor. "You've made enough handle of it. I should think you'd be the one to guess."

Mary was setting her feet out of bed. She snatched her slippers from the chair and put them on. Then she ran to the window and pushed the screen up and put out her head.

"Why, Andrew," she cried, "it's larkspur. It's in a bed, and it's budded, and the dirt's all dark as if somebody'd watered it. Andrew, who put that larkspur there?"

"You better git back into bed," said Andrew. His voice was shaking uncontrollably, and he felt the ache in his throat, and thought at the same time how queer

it was that she should have curls at the back of her neck: no other woman, he believed, ever had such curls. "You'll git all wore out."

Mary had turned to the clothes-press, where her few gowns hung in ordered care.

"Don't you talk to me," she said. "I'm goin' to git on some clo'es and go out and see that larkspur. Andrew, d'you put it there?"

"Course I put it there," said Andrew.

Mary had left the clothes-press door open, and she came to him and gazed up in his face with such a look of young delight that again his heart mysteriously ached.

"Andrew," she said, "what made you do such a thing? D'you do it for me, 'cause you thought I'd like it?"

"Course I did," said Andrew roughly. "Who d'ye think I'd do such a thing as that for if 'twa'n't for you? Do you s'pose there's anybody else I'd care whether they was pleased or not?"

Mary had forgotten her dress; she forgot the larkspur. She stood there clinging to his arm, and Andrew bent his rough cheek and touched her hair. His eyes were hot and aching, and he shook his head savagely, so that the tears, if they fell, should not splash her face and trouble her.

"O Andrew," she was saying, "if I hadn't set my eyes by you before, certain I should now."



## UP ON THE MOUNTAIN

MOLLIE DIXON, standing on the high, grassy bank, shoved up the pantry window, bent her head, covered with a disarray of beautiful dark hair, and crawled in. She stood a moment, to breathe and look about her, and laughed aloud at her daring.

"Same old winder ketch," said she. "'Twa'n't mended for me and 'twon't be for her."

She was a soft-stepping, slender woman, with a deep red under the tan of her cheeks and a strong light in her eyes. Every last carelessness of fashion and delight in color had bloomed out in her dress, the floating disorder of it, the rich rose of her neckerchief over the leaf-brown that covered her. She looked as if she had been blown by a wind, yet a wind that left no dust. She was all radiant cleanliness, a purity that glowed. She might but that moment have been bathing in cold moving water on a mountain, and so brought the blood to her face, and then have run tingling down the mountain path, a creature freshly made out of the elements, to live among men. She stood looking at the pantry shelves and absently moved two or three dishes into places she knew. Then, finding herself reverting to a hated routine, she frankly made up a face at the dishes and turned away from them into the kitchen. There she found the same homely scene she had known too well and loved to flee from, only a shade

sadder in its darkened tints. Everything was a little more worn, and there were trails of dust on surfaces not in the direct line of a careless broom. The oven door was open, and near it stood Jerry's rubber boots. She looked at the boots in a distaste that was amusing even to her. But it was real, it had a live root in her mind, and as she shut the oven door she pulled it delicately past, so that she might not touch them. Then she began to laugh with a sudden pleasure and great heartiness. She was never tired of playing little games to amuse herself, and no trouble was too great to make the game a good one,

"I've as great a mind to," said Mollie, speaking aloud, after the habit of those who live much alone, "as ever I had to eat."

At once her acts took on an absorbed directness. She lifted the stove-cover, crumpled a newspaper from the table, and smiled as she thrust it in, to think Jerry couldn't read it over and over until somebody gave him another one. He would hunt and hunt. He would do anything but buy another paper. While she brought kindling from the shed and laid her fire deftly, she was wondering why she hated so to do these household deeds, since she was so expert in them. No one had ever been a better housekeeper than Mollie. She knew that. Jerry knew it, too. She thought that was why he had so hated to let her go. But he had done the next best thing, after these months since their divorce. He had cast his eyes upon Hannah Crane, and she, too, was a good worker, and had thrift besides.

Now Mollie's fire was burning with a pleasant sound, and she filled the teakettle and put it on, singing under

her breath, it seemed so pleasant to find out things about Jerry. Not only was the catch of the pantry window unchanged from its old inefficiency, but the pump, too, had kept its vicious ways. It would run down unless you remembered to give it reminding strokes, and the pail of water sat there, as of old, to bring it up if it really did escape you. While she stood there, absently reading the story of the room, steps came plunging through the shed, and she turned, a hand at her leaping heart. But it was not Jerry who opened the door and stood there angrily regarding her. It was Horace Rokes, a little younger than she, curiously like her, and as full of life in the same gypsy way. He spoke hotly, almost with the opening of the door.

“What are you here for? What you doin’ of?”

At the sight of him Mollie recovered her mischievous calm.

“I thought I’d run in a minute,” said she.

“I was pickin’ apples,” said Horace, “and I see you climbin’ in through that pantry winder. I jumped off the ladder and run.” He had come in and stood facing her beside the stove. “Much as ever Sam Pete wa’n’t there with me, helpin’ me pick. S’pose he had been?”

“Well,” said Mollie, “spos’n’ he had?”

“Why, ’t would been all over the neighborhood, how Jerry ’d gone to the fair and took Hannah Crane, and you clim’ int’ his pantry winder.”

“Oh,” said Molly, “would it?”

“You know ’twould. Why, it’s breakin’ and enterin’.”

“So ’tis.”

She laughed, with an intimate delight of her own that stirred him the deeper. Perfectly as she bewitched him, he never could endure the way she had of cherishing queer thoughts and taking no pains to share them. But he felt worried, too.

"Why, Mollie," said he, "you and Jerry are divorced. You ain't forgot that, have you?"

"No," said Mollie, unmoved. "I ain't forgot it. I ain't likely to."

She took off the stove-cover and put in a stick of wood. The little act, suggestive of household tasks unthinkingly pursued, seemed to madden him the more.

"Then," said he, "you stop puttin' his firewood into that sto'."

"Mercy!" said Mollie. "I forgot to take off that kittle on the back. It's got some kind of a stew in it. I s'pose he's left it ready for his supper. You lift it off and set it in the sink. I'm afraid it'll burn on."

Involuntarily he made a movement toward it, but he stopped short.

"No," said he. "I ain't goin' to touch any man's kittles in his house when he ain't there."

"Then," said Mollie, "I guess you better be gittin' along home."

"And leave you here in his house? No, you don't. Why, Mollie, you've no more business to be in here movin' round as if you belonged here than as if such a thing couldn't be. You know you ain't. I dunno what possesses you. Seems if the devil had got into you."

He pushed his hand up over his tumbled hair, but a lock fell back over his forehead, and he looked hand-

some in a pathetic way that moved her. In spite of his bigness he was very boyish, and Mollie thought she liked him at the moment, because she was sorry for him. It seemed so foolish of him to care for her so much. She lifted the kettle from the stove, and he snatched it, in an angry haste, and looked about him, frowning for a place to set it.

"There in the sink," she bade him. "In the sink, Jerry, in the sink."

Before he could obey he turned an angry glance upon her. "My Lord!" he broke forth, as he set the kettle down, "you're callin' me by his name. D'you know what you said? You said, 'Jerry.'"

"Well, what if I did?" asked Mollie patiently. "Here we be in his house, and here's his things all over the room. There's his boots settin' there, and there's his kittle full o' stew. No wonder his name comes to my tongue."

"But I won't have it," said Horace. "'Tain't right. You've no business to. I don't want you to be thinkin' o' his name. I want you to be thinkin' o' mine."

"Well," said Mollie, her little irrepressible smile coming, "mebbe if I'd been married to you same's I was to Jerry, and it come to the same end, 'twould be your name. Specially if I happened on your boots."

She had given him a little advantage, she saw at once. But she did not care. Mollie had a direct impersonality in the intercourse of life. Her paths were never tortuous. She never dodged an issue. But he was taking the cue she had innocently given him.

"That's what I want, Mollie," said he. "I want

you to be married to me." He had grown pale under his tan, and his lip quivered in a way that softened her. Mollie, looking at him at first with calmness, suddenly felt the quickening of her heart. "You're as free as you were before —"

Here he balked and she helped him. "Before I married him. Yes, I s'pose I be in the eyes o' the law."

"Well, ain't you every other way?"

"Maybe I be. But there's things I can't forget. I can't forget how it seemed to live here."

She cast a comprehensive look about the kitchen, and her eyes came back to the boots. There they rested. Mollie was too well poised a creature to shudder, but though her eyes were grave it was evident the boots stood for something. She did not accept them.

"But 'twouldn't be the same," Horace was offering her, eagerly. "He was as nigh as the bark to a tree, and that ain't one o' my failin's. I'm free-handed, Mollie. You know that."

"Yes," said Mollie. She was looking down, so that her eyes did not commit her, and her tone she managed. "You're free-handed, Horace. You're good-hearted, too."

"I'm doin' pretty well," he urged eagerly, "considerin'. I owed some money, you know, on mother's sickness. But that's all paid up, all but that hunderd to Jerry."

Now she looked at him, in disappointment, he thought, almost reprovingly.

"D'you borrer money o' Jerry?" she asked.

He had been sorry many times that he had borrowed it, but that was since he had begun to meet her here

and there, as she went back and forth from her day's work.

"'Twas when mother and I fust come here to live," he said. "I didn't know you scarcely at all. I'd only see you go by. And Sam Pete told me 'f I was goin' to borrer money, Jerry had it by him. But I've got it all saved up, Mollie, a hunderd dollars. I could pay it this minute. I dunno why I put it off a day. I guess 'twas because I hated to change words with him."

"Yes," said Mollie, still with that air of vague distaste, "you pay him back."

"That's why I couldn't talk to you as free as I wanted to," he went on. "I couldn't somehow. Anyways, I couldn't start out thornin' you to marry me when I owed him money."

"I guess you better not talk about such things anyways," said Mollie gently. "I guess once is enough for some women. 'Tis for me."

"But don't you like me, Mollie?" he persisted. He was so near her now that she fancied she could see to the depths of his brown eyes. She had often thought if she had a son she should want him to look like Horace Rokes. "Don't you like me?"

At that minute Mollie was very near being sure she did like him and that it was her lot to go with him. Sex glamour hung her eyes with a soft yet bewildering mist, and she felt acquiescence, sad though it might be, in woman's lot.

"You needn't stay cooped up here," he was urging. "We'd move, so's 't you never'd set your eyes on anything you'd seen before. I could get into some mill or another, and I'd work winters and save up somethin'

for the rest o' the year, and summers we'd tramp, if you wanted to. I've got that kind of a wanderin' blood, same's you have."

"Yes," said Mollie gravely. "I know you have. Wanderin' blood! That's what started the trouble betwixt me and him."

"Don't go back to that," he said savagely. "We can't thrash that out."

"No," she persisted quietly. "There's nothin' to thrash out. Only if you feel about me as you say you do and mebbe —" She paused, and his quick breathing made her hurry on again. "Anyways, whether we come together or not, I'd ruther you'd know what 'twas that turned him ag'inst me. You wa'n't here in the beginnin' of it, but I s'pose the neighbors set it out to you, soon's you got acquainted."

"They said you went up on the mountain," he owned sulkily.

"Yes. That's true enough. What else?"

"Oh, what's the use! Well, they said you'd leave the house all day long, when he was off plowin' or with the thrashin'-machine, and set out his supper for him to find when he come home."

"Yes," said Mollie. "That's true enough, too. I don't wonder he couldn't stan' it. 'Twas no kind of a way for a married woman to act."

"I s'pose you think," said Horace jealously, "if you had it to do over ag'in you'd behave different to him."

"Oh, no," said Mollie, "I should do jest the same."

"There! And if you did he couldn't stan' it then



any more'n he could before. But I could, Mollie. I could stan' it."

"Yes," said Mollie. "I b'lieve you would."

"Don't you know why I coul?'" said Horace. "When you wanted to run off up on the mountain I'd go with you."

"Oh!" said Mollie, and it seemed to him his words had not been fortunate. The light died out of her face. It looked as if the pleasure of going up on the mountain had been queerly dependent on going alone. It gave him a new sting of jealousy. Jerry could be disposed of, even here in the presence of his household sanctities, but there were ghosts that could not be laid.

"I s'pose," Mollie was saying, "you think 'twas a queer thing for a woman to leave her house and home and run up on the mountain to stay a day or two at a time."

"No," said Horace roughly. "I don't think 'twas queer, seein' what you had to stan' to home. 'Twas natural enough."

Mollie stood looking past him through the window to the orchard across the road. At length she answered slowly:

"I s'pose 'twas. I never thought about it then, but now I come to think of it, I s'pose 'twas."

"I used to see you go by," said Horace. He was bending toward her with an intentness she did not see. Her mind was on her own grave thoughts. "Sometimes 'twas 'most sunset, and once mother said, 'There's that Mollie woman goin' up the mountain. I s'pose she's left Jerry to wash the supper-dishes.' That's

what she said. 'I s'pose Jerry's doin' the dishes all alone.' "

"No," said Mollie simply, "I never was quite so bad as that. I guess I allers cleared up 'fore I went."

Upon that, she left her place by the stove and began moving about the room, in the mechanical performance of old duties. She looked into the table drawer, took out the cloth she found folded there, and spread it on the table. Then she brought the sugar-bowl and spoonholder, and Horace, the red coming more and more into his face, watched her in a suppressed excitement, to see how many plates and cups she would put on. She disposed them with the same air of accustomed ease, and he burst out angrily:

"Mollie, you're settin' the table."

Mollie looked at the work of her hands as if she had not fully noted it in the doing, but was not surprised.

"Yes," said she, "so I be."

His excitement grew with his discoveries.

"And you've put on two plates. And two cups."

"Yes, I s'pose I have."

"Who are they for? You and Jerry?"

"Why," said Mollie, "I dunno who they're for. I set 'em on, that's all, same's I allers did."

"Two cups," he continued, in a rage of jealousy, "and two plates —"

"Hark!" said Mollie. She held up a hand to stop him. "Somebody's comin'."

A step struck the threshold of the shed. She did not need to look. Remembered weariness and apprehension told her who it was.

"Who is it?" Horace asked her, in a whisper.

"It's Jerry," said she. "Don't you hear? It's Jerry."

The door opened and Jerry stepped in, halting a moment on the threshold and holding the door still half-open behind him. He was a heavy man with a dull, obstinate face, and now he looked even uncouth in the awkwardness of his best clothes.

"Well," said he. His voice was a formless one of no resonance and dulled at the edges. Mollie quivered a little as it struck upon her ears. "So you're here, both on ye."

Mollie was facing him, a warm flush on her cheeks and her eyes dilated. Horace, too, faced him, because he knew what was becoming, but there was shame in his glance. He had a man's distaste for invading his neighbor's house.

"Yes," Mollie answered simply. "I thought you'd gone to the fair."

"Then it's lucky I come back," said the man dryly. "I concluded I'd better git home to milkin', but I s'pose somethin' come over me and I got wind of what's goin' on. Only I never knew 'twas breakin' an' enterin'."

Horace gave an impatient shake of the shoulders. He hated the place where he found himself. But Mollie was looking at Jerry in her serious way of being patiently willing to explain.

"'Twas I come in, Jerry," said she. "I clim' int' the pantry winder. And he sees me do it and come to the door. I guess he was kinder tried with me for doin' it. I guess 'most anybody'd been. So I let him in and we've stood here talkin'."

Jerry's gaze had gone to the table, and he frowned heavily. There was not enough swiftness of feeling in him for a sneer, but he had his dumb distastes.

"So you've begun to git supper," he said. Then he turned to Horace. "Ain't you got enough to eat to home?"

Before he could answer, Mollie had struck in, with her impulsive eagerness: "I'll tell you what I set the table for, Jerry. And what I got in for. I don't know's I hardly see why I done it, myself; but I guess I can tell."

Jerry seated himself, as if he emphasized his right to be there, and brought his fist down on the table with a heavy blow. He put his hand to his collar, and pulled at it. The blood was getting into his face and he breathed heavily. Even in the days before her leaving him Mollie had never seen him so moved, and she looked at him solicitously.

"I'll tell ye why ye broke into my house," he said. "I dunno why you built up a fire in the sto' nor set them dishes onto the table, but I know why you're both here. You owe me —" he looked up at Horace now "— a matter of a hunderd dollars."

"Yes," Mollie answered for him. "We were speakin' about it only a minute ago."

"A matter of a hunderd dollars," Jerry repeated, still looking at Horace. "And you give me your note. And you see me put it into that desk. And you talked it over together, and you planned how you'd git it into your hands and one lie and t'other swear to it."

Horace took a long step toward him; his hand was raised, and Mollie stepped between.

"No, Jerry," said she. "We ain't been into that room, either of us. We ain't crossed the sill. If your note's in there, you go and see if it ain't where you left it."

"It's where 'twas when you see me put it there, two year ago," said he. "But it's locked up. And the key's here." He touched his pocket significantly. Then a dumb rage came swelling up in him. "But I don't need to tell you that," he said, "neither on you. You found the desk locked, and that's why you're here, burnin' up my firewood in my kitchen sto', and considerin' what you'd better do. God knows what you built up the fire for. Mebbe 'twas to burn the note. Mebbe 'twas to cover your tracks and give you a handle if anybody ketched you here. But whatever you come to do you ain't done it; and you better be goin'. Wherever you belong, you better be goin' there."

His heavy hand drummed on the table, and Horace, staring at him in a speechless anger, wondered what he could do, and yet stood still. Mollie put out her arm between them, as if she read his rage and was fending him away.

"Jerry," said she, "you talk jest as you used to. You're a terrible mean man."

Jerry apparently did not hear. His fingers still beat on the table, and again he lifted his hand to his collar and drew a stertorous breath. Mollie came a step nearer to him, and put out her hand as if she were about to touch him, to recall him to himself. But that she did not do. She was no more willing to touch him than the boots.

"Jerry," said she, as if she were rousing him from sleep. "Jerry!"

He looked up at her, slowly and unwillingly, and, having gained his eyes, she kept them.

"Now," said she, "I'm goin' to tell you what I come in here for. I didn't set out to do it. I was goin' by, and somethin' come over me, and I knew you were gone, and I wanted to see the house once more, same's it was, 'fore Hannah comes into it."

His eyes quickened a little as he looked at her, and when she caught the credulous acceptance in them she shook her head despairingly.

"No, Jerry," said she patiently. "It ain't that. It wa'n't because I had any feelin' for the house, nor our livin' in it, but because I wanted to bring it all back. I wanted to see myself movin' round, doin' the work same as I used to, and see 'f I could stan' doin' it for anybody else."

Horace forgot his rage, and turned upon her, glowing.

"You wouldn't have to, Mollic," said he, in the lover's voice of a perfect self-abandonment. "I told you so. We'd go here and there. If you didn't want to be tied down, you shouldn't be."

Jerry laughed a little now, in a mirthless way.

"Yes," he said. "I knew what was goin' on. I've seen ye round together. Well, you've got more courage 'n I have to take up with a woman that leaves her good comfortable house and traipses up on the mountain."

Mollie was looking from one to the other, in a wistful, puzzled way, as if she weighed them, one against the

other, and could not strike the balance. Yet it was without hurry or confusion.

"You never could understand, Jerry," said she, "what made me go up on the mountain."

"Yes," said Jerry, now looking at his quivering hand on the table, "I guess I understand well enough."

"You used to ask me," said Mollie, "and I couldn't tell you then. Seemed as if you'd ought to know. Besides, I didn't hardly know myself. But I felt different up there. 'Twas the wind. And the sun risin' off there in the east, and the way that bird sung. I never heard that bird anywheres else. I'd get so homesick I'd have to go. And last it seemed foolish not to, I wanted it so much. So that was the time I carried up the blankets and picked me the fir balsam for my bed."

Jerry was looking at her in a passion new to her knowledge of him. His somber eyes blazed upon her. He spoke now in a voice that sounded as if, having been choked so long, it must break out ungoverned.

"Who was it?" he said.

Mollie stared back at him, her eyes widening.

"Who was what?" she asked.

Horace, hot with remonstrance, now stepped forward.

"You've no business," said he, "to ask her a question like that."

"Why ain't I?" Jerry threw back, turning a darkened glance on him. "What business is it o' yourn?"

"It's mine if it's anybody's," said Horace. He choked upon the words. "If you could throw anybody off and git a divorce from her because she staid away

from you long enough to let you, you've got no part nor lot in her. What difference does it make who 'twas? It's an old story now."

Jerry was still looking at him, frowning, as if he studied him.

"No," said he, as if to himself. "'Twa'n't you. You wa'n't round here in the beginnin'."

"What difference does it make to you?" Horace asked again, angrily, yet as if he had a sort of understanding of the man's mood, as if he had dwelt madly upon the question himself, and had at last resolved to put it by. "Mollie's goin' to marry me, if it's any-ways accordin' to law. If you can marry Hannah, I guess Mollie can marry me."

A little protesting sound came from her. Horace understood it.

"No," said he, "I know you ain't said so. But I sha'n't let her alone till she does," he added, to Jerry. "And so, I tell ye, what concerns her concerns me, and who she went up on the mountain with don't concern you no more'n the wind that blows. It's her business — and mine. And I sha'n't ask her."

"What?" cried Mollie. Her voice broke so sharply that they turned to her. She had lost her softened look. She was in a flame of anger. "What?" she repeated. Then, as neither of them answered, she continued. "Are you talkin' about my goin' up on the mountain with somebody?"

"Why, yes," said Jerry negligently, as if he saw how foolish it was to go over a track they both had learned. "You know well enough we be."

Mollie bent forward, breathless, looking at them as



if she had not seen them before, and they had done startling things.

"You think I went up there with somebody —" she began.

"I dunno's you went with him," Jerry qualified indifferently. "I s'pose you met him there."

"A man!" she repeated.

"I dunno who he was," Jerry continued. "I allers s'posed he come up the loggin'-path t'other way. He might ha' been a railroad man from the Junction. I never found out, and I took mighty good care not to. I s'pose if I had I should ha' had words with him, and I ain't one to meddle nor make. I'm a law-abidin' citizen."

"A man!" said Mollie, again. "Me, a married woman, traipsin' up on the mountain to meet a man!"

"There! there!" said Jerry, in his old way of quelling her. "It don't make no difference now who 'twas. It's past and gone. Whoever 'twas, he didn't stan' by ye."

A dull resentment in his voice made it seem as if he had irrationally hoped the man would stand by.

"Well," said Mollie. She spoke reflectively, and yet as if something had been concluded. "Well, I might as well be goin'. I'm glad I clim' into the pantry winder, Jerry. I've found out things I never dreamt of. But you needn't be afraid I shall do it ag'in."

"No," said Horace. "I guess you won't. You'll have a pantry of your own, and you won't need to be makin' kitchen fires. They'll be made for ye, and you won't have to put your hands into water, where you're goin'."

"Where I'm goin'?" she repeated.

"Yes. I dunno where, but wherever you want to live, there it shall be."

"Oh, I know where I'm goin' to live," said Mollie. "But I guess we better go over this ag'in, so's to make sure. Jerry, you thought I went up on the mountain to meet a man. Well, I dunno's I blame you. 'Twas what you would think."

Jerry did not answer. Perhaps he had not heard. His brief emotion was over, and he had taken his overalls from the nail and was pulling off his collar. Mollie, when he threw the collar on the table, made an involuntary movement toward it. She knew exactly where its place was in the bureau drawer, and some dumb habit of order moved her to put it there. But Horace understood the gesture and glowered at her, and she dropped her hand, not to please him, but because he had reminded her. She spoke to him.

"And you b'lieved it, too?"

"B'lieved what?" he asked.

"You b'lieved I went up on the mountain to meet a man."

His face flushed. His voice was eager in its sympathy.

"I told you I never laid it up ag'inst you. I don't now. I never 've asked you a question. Now have I, Mollie?"

"No," said Mollie. She paused, considering gravely. Then a little smile came and touched the corners of her mouth. "But if you thought that about me, Horace, I'd almost sooner you had. Well, there!" She roused herself, and the smile deepened. "I'm go-

in' now. It ain't wuth makin' such a handle of. Jerry, you better put a washer on that pump. There ain't no need of a pump's running down. 'Twould make some women as nervous as a witch."

At the door she turned. Horace had followed her, and when she faced him their eyes were on a level.

"What you laughin' at?" he demanded jealously.

"I ain't laughin'," said Mollie, and then, though her mouth kept its queer little smile, he saw her eyes were wet. "No, don't you come. You better stay and both talk it out together. I guess I'll go up towards the mountain a spell. I kinder like to listen to that bird. And you can say what you're a mind to, to one another; but don't you either of you say anything to me, 'bout this or anything else. I've had all I want to do with men-folks, if that's the things they think."

She went out quietly, and they saw her stepping carefully over the loose board in the shed. Then Jerry began drawing on his overalls, and Horace, with a little awkward "Well!" also went out through the shed. But he did not follow her. He looked once after her, where she was hurrying along toward the sunset. She was on a knoll, and her figure looked very tall against the brightening sky.









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